

PADMINI

A Historical Romance

BY

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"How shallow and false is the notion that personal beauty is a frail and fleeting thing! It triumphs over wisdom and virtue, not only in this life but in death—redeems and veils both folly and crime, and sweetens the saddest pages of history."

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INTRODUCTION

IN the pages which follow have been brought together two historical figures, whose fates intertwined at many points, but who in life, if we can credit Rajput tradition, came face to face once only—in a mirror.

Whether or no my story as a whole can properly be termed a historical romance, I leave others to decide. My own humble opinion is that it can, for I conceive that the main actors and their actions lie within the usually accepted though not very clearly defined limits separating the historical from pure romance.

Sultan 'Ala-ud-din, Rani Padmini, her husband Rawul Rattan Singh and many others figuring in the tale, all undoubtedly lived and had reality. Chittor was certainly sacked by 'Ala-ud-din, and Padmini did immolate herself by fire to avoid falling into his hands. Equally established are the death, in the final phase of the siege, of Rattan Singh, and of the escape of Ajey Singh to carry on the royal line.

So far at least this novel is historical, though admittedly it has been necessary at times to resort to intensification and even restoration where the record is weak or faded, since

historians invariably fail the writer of roman by giving only extraordinary events and omitting the every-day life of each particular time and country.

But what about 'Ala-ud-din's motive for his attack upon Chittor—a motive which has been made the mainspring of my story. Is the version given true?

Certainly the author of "Akbar and the Hindus" did not believe it. He dismisses it summarily thus:—

"On 25th August, 1303, after a protracted siege, 'Ala-ud-din Khilji stormed Chittor and put 30,000 Hindus to the sword, his own troops also suffering heavily but more particularly from the pernicious influence of the rainy season. Tradition has marvellously embellished this affair by alleging as its motive 'Ala-ud-din's desire to win by force of arms Padmini, the charming wife of Rana Rattan Singh and the daughter of a Cingalese prince. This story has served as theme for several poets."

My answer to the question is that, while I admit the magnifying powers of tradition and the tendency among poets to embellish, this total rejection of 'Ala-ud-din's traditional motive is not justified. I accept the critical view that Padmini's home was at Singoli in the Neemuch District and that Singoli is sufficiently akin in sound to Cingal (Ceylon) to tempt poets to unrein their fancy. But the quotation given

above ignores a very important admission by one early Muslim writer, who gave the following parallel if not actually substantiatory account of what took place.

In the first assault on Chittor Rattan Singh was captured and taken as a prisoner to Delhi. There he languished for some considerable time. In the end he was released on agreeing to surrender to 'Ala-ud-din his lovely young wife, Padmini, an account of whose beauties had reached the Sultan and bewitched him. But the Rajput clansmen would not hear of such sullyng of honour. Outwardly agreeing, they planned to get Rattan Singh away and to cover his retreat by a ruse, which was precisely what I have described in this volume as happening at Chittor.

So the main differences between the Muslim and Rajput versions are of locale and honour. And since the former denies the proud boast of the house of Mewar that among all the Rajput clans they alone have never stooped to give a daughter in marriage to the Muslim rulers of Delhi, I prefer the latter version as the more probable and as being more in accordance with the known concepts of honour among Rajputs.

There remain the mirror scene and the vision of Kangra Rani, guardian goddess of Chittor. As regards the first, here frankly I suspect the poets of invention. Yet the invention, if such it be, is so unimportant historically

and so romantically colourful, that any writer might be excused for clinging to it.

As for the alleged appearance in person of the goddess, Tod suggests that the scene may have been got up by Rattan Singh to animate the spirit of resistance. The story, he affirms, is consistent with the belief of the tribe; and that the goddess should openly manifest her wish to retain as her tiara the battlements of Chittor on conditions so congenial to the warlike and superstitious Rajput was a gauge that would be readily taken up, and fully answering the end. It therefore deserves a place in the annals of the siege.

The absence of psychological documents has made it necessary to fill in the gaps, and in this I have been more blessed than many writers, who find themselves faced with the task of constructing intimate detail for a dim or forgotten past. Rajputana in its polity, its customs and its outlook has changed so little through the centuries, that anyone, who has lived close to it as I have can recapture the past from the present. For instance, it is doubtful whether such ceremonies as the Dassera and the Holi have changed in any essential since the days when Padmini watched them from her balcony. As for the scenes of dialogue, these are by no means all fictions of imagination. Many of them have been drawn from Persian or Rajput writings purporting to be accurate accounts. Others, where the

is silent, have been borrowed from real and authentic scenes. In a very few only has dialogue been deliberately added, and then its feasibility has been fully weighed with due regard to the known Indian phenomena of the class of person into whose mouth the words have been put.

In ascribing the origin of the Children of India to the line of King Porus, I have used discretion in selecting what appears to me the most probable of several divergent accounts in their beginnings.

Two important characters (Man Kubeswara and Kalji) admittedly do not belong to the actual record. They have been invented to complete the picture. For who could imagine a court without a Lord of Rhymes, or an Indian tragedy unconnected with the intrigues of some treacherous minister!

And now a word about the spelling of the proper nouns.

In the various authorities consulted the name of my heroine appears as Padmini, Padmani or Pudmani. Chittor sometimes has been written as Chittur, sometimes two; elsewhere it has been written as Chittur or Chittore. Recently in two English newspapers of India, appearing on the same day, the great Hindu festival has been spelled, in the one as Dassera, and, in the other as Dussehra. In the circumstances some choice of spelling had to be made and

this has been done with an ear to euphony and an eye to symmetry.

The idea of writing this book came suddenly into my mind one evening, when I was sitting on the walls of Chittorgarh watching the sun go down over the plains below. Ruins are the ideal setting for evoking ghosts and visions of the past, and of all the ruins that I know none is so haunted by the past as Chittorgarh.

The idea once conceived, no time was lost. Every book and every legend bearing on the subject was eagerly sought out and made to yield its help. Perhaps the most difficult part of the task was to obtain a true picture of the old fortress as it existed six hundred years ago.

It is possible that Indian readers and others who know India well may object to the use by Padmini and Rattan Singh of each other's names, as being entirely opposed to Hindu usage. The objection is, of course, valid. A Hindu lady would never address her husband by name, but as "Andataji" or by some such honorific. Rattan Singh would certainly have called his queen "Chhohanaji" and not Padmini. But in recording their conversations in the English tongue, such modes, if adhered to, would grate strangely on foreign ears, and so have been replaced by European forms of address and cast of speech.

Perhaps two further points need clearing. Some reader may be tempted to think that, in

picturing a Rajput prince consulting his wife in matters of state, I have given to these gilded captives an importance they do not enjoy. He might even quote in support of this view the Rajput saying about the relative unimportance of descent on the female side that: "It is, who planted the tree, not where did it grow." Such an idea is quite erroneous. In the words of Colonel James Tod, the great Rajput historian and champion: "A Rajput consults his wife in every transaction; from her ordinary actions he draws the omen of success, and he appends to her name the epithet of 'devi' or 'god-like'."

Lastly some critic may say: "Ha: this writer does not really know his subject. He has actually made a Muslim and a Hindu dine together." Well, at times they do and have done so, though probably or certainly not out of the same dish or off food prepared by the same cook. But anyway, is it only to poets that a little licence is to be permitted?

In the end, with the few exceptions mentioned, I feel I can safely say with Montaigne: "I have only made a nosegay of culled flowers, and have brought little of my own but the thread which binds them together."

I

THE soft mantle of dusk rustled down upon the hill-fortress of Chittor, capital of Mewar State, and upon the little walled township of Talehti snuggling for safety at its foot. The last mellow echoes of temple bells had died lingeringly away, leaving a stillness welcome after the tumult of the day. Just now Talehti's crooked, narrow streets lay shrouded in the dust raised by homing cattle, but all along the hill-top, where the air was clearer, lazy spirals of blue smoke could be seen ascending from many a kitchen. There was the appetising odour of baking bread and of butter sizzling in fry-pans. Soon it would be time for the evening meal.

Prince Rattan Singh, his tunic cast aside, was snatching a short rest in an upper room of his palace. He was hot, weary and a trifle bored. From earliest dawn he had been on duty welcoming endless parties of clansmen come to congratulate his father, Rawul Samar Singh, on 'another knot in his years'. These royal birthday parties, he told himself, were apt to be trying affairs for those who, like himself, were charged with the arrangements.

Through the unglazed window by which he sat, came fitful puffs of the rising evening breeze, so cool, so sweet that they seemed to be carrying the notes of a song. He rested his head against the sill and listened. Soon he fell asleep.

He was awakened by the discreet cough of a maid-servant, who had entered the apartment.

"The Princess Padmini sends you her love and this handkerchief to adorn the hilt of your sword at to-night's banquet," she announced.

Rattan Singh took the handkerchief in his hands, admired its bright pattern, felt its silky texture. A tender smile played about the corners of his mouth. Sweet of my lovely Padmini, he thought. Always when state affairs keep me away from her, she sends me some little thing to remind me that I am in her thoughts. Aloud he said: "Convey my love and most grateful thanks to the Princess. Tell her that I hope to see her some time to-night—that is if the guests don't stay too late."

The servant raised her hands in salutation, bowed and withdrew.

Left alone again, the Prince picked up his sword and knotted one corner of the handkerchief to the hilt, leaving the rest to hang loose about the purple velvet of the scabbard. Once more he smiled and mused: fancy using one of *her* gifts to wipe a blade should it be blooded!

But, thank goodness, there can be no such incident to-night. It will be just for decoration as she said.

He called to his personal servant, Jaysu, sitting outside the door—a grey-beard grown old in service, soft of speech and soft of tread.

“Are my bath and clothes ready?”

“Yes, my Prince, and it’s getting late.”

“Right. I’ll be ready in no time.” He sighed wearily, then added half aloud: “I wonder who the liar was who said that time was only made for slaves.”

Half-an-hour later he picked up his sword and left the room.

His dress for this gala evening consisted of a flowing coat of white muslin slashed down the left breast to show a flowered silk under-vest; close-fitting trousers that wrinkled lightly down the lower half of his leg; a kammerband heavily embroidered in gold thread; and a scarlet pagri with gilt fringe, tied closely and lying flat on his head in the distinguishing style of Mewar. In honour of the occasion he had put on, too, a necklace of large, uncut emeralds, and a diamond ring, which caught and reflected the flickerings of the little oil lamps, the *charags*, set in the walls to light the winding stairway.

The picture which old Jaysu saw momentarily as his master left the room, was one which always filled him with a glow of pride and almost dog-like devotion. This tall, lithe,

broad-shouldered, more than handsome future ruler over the destinies of the Children of the Sun had been his special charge, since that early morning twenty-five years ago, when the drums had boomed out from the bastions of the fortress announcing that Rawul Samar Singh had begotten a male child.

Since then, day by day, month by month, year by year, he had watched him grow up, noticing each characteristic as it developed and marvelling at the curious mixture in his nature—fearless leadership and the mysticism of a poet—till it seemed to him that the mortal body of this young prince, whom he had come to love more than a son, God had seen fit to make the dwelling place of two diverse souls.

As the young body ripened Jaysu had stood guard over it against the temptations and allurements inseparable from zenanas. With joy and relief he had seen the young man turn from them in disgust, preferring always the company of soldiers and savants. And, since virtue deserves reward, he had been overjoyed when the loveliest and sweetest of princesses, Padmini Chohanaji of Ceylon, had become his prince's bride. Now he could look forward to that day, when once again the roll of drums would announce the birth of a royal heir. He awaited that day eagerly, yet could not restrain some feeling of disappointment that still, after the lapse of two years, their union had not as yet been blessed.

Down in the courtyard Rattan Singh was joined by Rana Laksman Singh of Shishoda, closest relative of the royal house, his seven sons, and by an uncle of the Princess Padmini, Gorah by name. Together they left the main gate, a lofty arch crowned by four pillared minarets.

The way lay at first between two small lakes, the one named Rattaneshwar after himself, the other Rathoria after his grandmother, a princess of the Rathore clan of Rajputs. The night was a clear one, and the walls of the fort stood fret-worked against the sky. Now and again a bat, performing its strange soft flight, passed over their heads.

"A somewhat pleasanter birthday feast for your revered father than the last one," remarked the Rana to Rattan Singh, looking up into the brilliant starlight.

"Yes: definitely. It was our lances which fed best on that occasion."

"Nevertheless that also was a good party," put in Uncle Gorah. "Do you remember that last bunch of Mahomedans we cornered just before dusk?"

"Now then, Uncle," said Rattan Singh patting him on the back, "none of your gory reminiscences to-night. I'm afraid you're never really happy unless you're killing some poor mother's son."

"Oh: come: that's being a bit hard, isn't it? After all what right had Ulagh Khan and

his armies to march through Rajput territories?"

He was referring to an attempted invasion of Guzerat, just a year earlier, by Ulagh Khan, brother of Sultan' Ala-ud-din Khilji, when the Mahomedan army had been intercepted on its way by Rawul Samar Singh's forces and soundly defeated.

"No right at all. But then what do the Muslims care about anyone's rights?"

"They ought to be given a good lesson in manners."

"Agreed, and I've no doubt you'll have another opportunity for trying to teach them that lesson."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure. That is unless a miracle occurs."

By now they were passing through the main bazaar, where little shops and booths were still open and carrying on a brisk business. As the party passed, both sellers and buyers left their chaffering to pay respect to their ruler's son. Half a mile further on the party turned right and shortly afterwards arrived at the Tripolia Gate of the palace.

This great portal is protected by two towers and contains within a guard-room. It gives entry to a spacious courtyard surrounded by buildings. Just to the left as one enters is a stable, in which on this night stood the Rawul's favourite elephant, Genda. This noble animal, almost human in its understanding and

knowledge, raised its trunk in greeting. Rattan Singh went over to it and rubbed its ears. As far back as he could remember there had existed between himself and Genda a happy friendship, one that had been cemented later in many a hard-fought fight.

"Had an extra good supper to-night?" inquired the prince looking up at the great mass towering above him.

Genda swayed from side to side, his little beady eyes twinkling in the torch-light.

"And longing for another chance to trample down the infidels, I bet. I believe you're just as blood-thirsty as that wicked uncle of mine, you old villain."

He gave Genda a last pat, turned and walked towards the Darikhana, the hall of audience.

As he crossed the courtyard he turned for a moment to glance up at the buildings away to his left. From somewhere up there, he felt sure, Padmini was looking out of one of the many grilled windows. Usually she lived with him in his own palace, but to-day, for the birthday festivities, she had moved over here and now occupied the quarters specially set aside for the zenana of the heir-apparent. He waved a hand and went on. Then joining the rest of the party, he entered the hall.

Rattan Singh's entry was the sign to rise for all but his father. The old Rawul was sitting on a low dais, spread with rich carpets. Behind

him stood four attendants bearing emblems of royalty, peacock's feather set bouquet-wise in long gold handles, and whisks of Yak tails. He made his obeisance to the Rawul and then took his seat just below and on the right of the dais.

The entertainment opened with singing by a troupe of Nautch girls. There was the usual auspicious hymn, sung in chorus, to the glory of god Deogi, through whose interposition the Rawul's house had effected all its conquests. This was followed by a song, sung solo and specially written for the occasion. It told of the glorious deeds of the Rawul in peace and war, and made special reference to the last year's battle with Ulagh Khan. This part evidently appealed greatly to Uncle Gorah, for he reached forward and threw a gold coin to the girl as a present.

"The Thakur Saheb does well," said the old Rawul, adding several more coins to the one already lying at the singer's feet. "But is it the singer's words or her pretty face that attracts him?"

This remark was greeted by general laughter. Uncle Gorah's affairs of the heart were well-known.

Next a dance was performed, and while this was in progress goblets of Asa, a favourite and very potent Rajput wine, were served.

At the end of the dance, the Nautch girls withdrew and sat down at the end of the hall. Their place was taken by the royal bard, Man

Kubeswara—Lord of Rhymes. He was an old man with white beard and whiskers brushed upwards and parted at the chin. He came forward slowly and with dignity befitting one whose family for close on a thousand years had recorded and preserved unbroken the annals of the royal house of Mewar. He carried under his left arm a large roll of manuscript.

“My God! —is he going to read all that?” grumbled Uncle Gorah. “It’ll take hours and I’m as hungry as a hunter already.”

“Have another drink,” offered Rattan Singh soothingly. “Nothing will stop the Lord of Rhymes on an occasion like this.”

“Thanks, I will. And tell the servant to leave the bottle near me, since we’re likely to have to sit here half the night.”

Man Kubeswara had unrolled his manuscript and was now declaiming his verses in a high yet sonorous voice which rolled round the hall and seemed startlingly strong for so old a body. He was recounting in his own inimitable way the early history of the House of Mewar. Now and again he would slow down to emphasize some special rhyming or neat little allusion, and at such times his right hand would be raised, first finger and thumb together moving gently back and forward in time with the meter. His story was an epic of endurance and heroism which has thrilled countless generations and still thrills.

He took his listeners back into a dim past when King Porus had opposed the Greek invaders of the land of Ind. One of Porus' sons went south to found a new line, and from his loins were begotten the Sooryvansi, Children of the Sun, the senior surviving branch of which was represented by their beloved Rawul, Samar Singh.

He told them of early conquests and how the Sooryvansi founded a kingdom in Sorastha; now Kathiawar, and how, centuries later, their capital, Balabhi, fell before barbarian invaders. That event took place in the fifth century of the Christian calendar. From the sack Queen Pooshpavati alone escaped, bearing in her womb the hope of the future. In a cave the queen gave birth to a male child. Immediately afterwards, entrusting the child to a Brahmin lady, Camlavati, to bring up, she mounted a funeral pyre and in its flames left life to join her lord in Haripur—the abode of the Sun.

The child was named Goha, cave-born, and his descendants became known as Gohilote. As he grew up his wild ways were a source of perpetual uneasiness to his religious-minded protectors. In the words of an old legend: "How could they hide the ray of the sun?" He associated with the Venapootras, the children of the forest, the Bhils; he slew animals and ate their flesh, and, finally, he was elected Chief of the Bhils of Edur and anointed on the

forehead with blood drawn from the cut finger of one of his savage electors.

For eight generations his descendants ruled the Bhils, till they, tiring of foreign rule, rose and slew the eighth prince. The descendants of the Brahmin lady, Camlavati, who had become the hereditary priests of the Gohilotes, once again preserved the line. Bapa, the infant heir of the murdered prince, was conveyed by them to safety and brought up in the mountains above Nagda, a day's journey from this hallowed spot, Chittor.

The old bard paused to take a drink of water. There was the sound of movement on every side, the stretching of cramped limbs by a spell-bound audience. Only Uncle Gorah seemed unaffected by the story. The bottle by his side was empty, his pagri sat awry on his head, and he had *hiccoughs.

"One of your friends thinking of you, Uncle," Rattan Singh told him.

"I've said all the names I can remember with no results."

"Try the name of your little girl friend over there in the corner," someone suggested.

Uncle Gorah gave him a withering look and continued: "I think I'd better get out into the open air before Old Whiskers starts again. Be

*Hiccoughing in India is attributed to one of your friends thinking of you. To cure it all you have to do is to repeat the names of all your friends till you come to the name of the right one.

a good chap, Rattan and ask your father to excuse me."

Permission granted, he rose to his feet and proceeded, a little unsteadily, down the hall. Pausing before the Nautch girls, he spoke to the one he had given the present to, evidently making some suggestion to her. The rest of the assembly were amused to see her shake her head vehemently. Finally he passed out of sight.

"The trouble about that uncle-in-law of yours, Rattan," observed the Rawul to his son, "is that he's just about as reckless over his drinking as he is about his fighting."

"I'm afraid he is, Father. But he's a grand fellow all the same. Don't you agree?"

"I do—the right sort of friend to have if one finds oneself in a tight corner."

The Bard was ready to continue his recitation, and the hall settled down to silence once more. He had brought his story up to Bapa Rawul, the focal centre of his tale, and was now prepared to give full rein to fantasy.

Bapa Rawul—what a name to conjure with! Founder of a line of a hundred kings, feared as a monarch, adored as more than mortal, immortal even, ruling by universal consent under the titles of Hindu Surya (Sun of the Hindus), Rajguru (Preceptor of Princes) and Chakravarti (Universal Lord)—is there any wonder that legend has clothed his memory in mysterious garb? And if one should be tempted to question the probability of these stories, at least refrain

from doing it within the bounds of Mewar: to do so there would sound as sacrilege in the ears of its people.

The Bard touched lightly on Bapa's prank round the old mango-tree of Nagda. His audience needed to be told none of the details: they had learned them at their mothers' knees. This frolic, by which young Bapa found himself married to all the village lassies, caused his flight from Nagda and originated his greatness but at the same time burdened him with all these damsels. The male companions of his flight were two Bhils, Baleo and Dewa, whose descendants, as honoured guests, were present on this evening.

The Bard continued his tale.

At one time, to support himself, Bapa engaged himself as a cowherd, but soon found himself in trouble. One favourite brown cow returned each evening with udders empty. Bapa was suspected of stealing the milk.

Worried by the accusation, of which he was entirely innocent, he decided to watch the cow closely. He followed her to a narrow dell where he beheld the udder spontaneously pouring its stores amidst the shrubs. Looking more carefully, he discovered the phallic symbol of the 'great God', which daily was receiving this lacteal shower. Nearby, too, he came upon a hermit, Harita, whom the cow fed also.

Aided by this sage, Bapa laid his plans. He was anointed by Harita as Regent of

Eklinga. Bhavani, the consort of god Shiva, also took a hand, presenting him with a magic two-edged sword that was forged by Visvakarma, craftsman of the gods, and weighed an ounce less than sixty-four pounds, but increasing his stature to twenty feet (less one inch) to enable him to wield it. Thus armed and having collected a small force, he attacked the fort of Chittor, then in possession of his mother's kinsmen, the Moris, slew the garrison, and became lord of Chittor.

After a long and glorious reign, during which he subjugated all the countries around, yet found time to honour the spot, where the phallic symbol had been found, by erecting a noble temple thereon and entrusting it to the charge of Harita and his heirs in perpetuity, he handed over his State to his son, and passed his last days in the forests as a Sanyasi, a religious recluse.

The Bard sketched briefly the intervening years. Then on and up to the reign of Rawul Samar Singh, years during which a perpetual struggle with the Muslim invaders was waged, and always successfully. Finally he closed with these words: "And to you Rawul Samar Singh, Regent of Eklinga, Sun of the Hindus, scourge of the Muslims and ruling representative of this noble line, may God grant long life and prosperity."

The spell was broken: there was rustling and the rattle of swords as all arose.

Then the Rawul, in a voice that could be heard above all else, was saying: "Man Kubeswara, thou and thine ancestors have served my family loyally for more than thirty generations. To-day, in recognition of those services, I bestow upon thee and thine heirs, to be enjoyed so long as the sun and moon shall shine, the gift of a Jagir of five villages. May God grant to thee many, many years to enjoy its fruits."

* * *

In the great courtyard the birthday feast was in full swing. The ceremonial cup of cheer—opium dissolved in water—had passed from hand to hand. And now, seated, cross-legged, on carpets, the guests were doing full justice to heaped trays set on low stools before them. Uncle Gorah had recovered from his hiccoughs, had filled in the time by taking a nap, and now was enjoying himself immensely. There was the hum of talk, punctuated now and again by loud laughter or stilled for a time to listen to a song. One pretty young Nautch girl reaped a rich reward for her song "Forgive." It was an old favourite and one which Rajputs love.

Grant me a draught of honey from thy lips.
Or, if forgive thou cannot, grant me death,
Pierced by the arrows of thine eyes and yet
Enchained within thine arms till life expires.

Thou art my only jewel, the single pearl,
Found in the ocean of my mortal birth:
I can no longer bear to see thine eyes,
By nature blue, by wrath turn'd lotus-red.

Thy silence kills me. Speak! Speak in that voice

That thrills me through as music's sweetest chord.

Say thou forgiv'st me: life I count as death
Without the promise of thy pard'ning smile.

"Them's the sort of sentiments I like to hear," announced Uncle Gorah wagging his head roguishly. "When your girl gets it as bad as that, you've never got to worry again that she may be kissing someone else round the corner." He blew the singer a kiss with his fingers as she went.

Some hours later the Master of Ceremonies, not without a certain feeling of relief, watched the last of the revellers disappear through the gateway on their somewhat unsteady way home. Then he dismissed the sleepy servants and ordered the Tripolia to be closed.

II

RATTAN Singh mounted the steps which led to Padmini's bed-room. Arrived at the top, he stood for a time drinking in the fresh night air, and looking out over the scene lit by an enormous yellow moon sinking in the west. Now that everyone had gone the stillness seemed profound, making the occasional shuffling of Genda in its stall below seem unnaturally loud.

He was in no hurry; in fact he could not make up his mind whether he should awaken Padmini or not. For her, too, the day must have been a long and tiring one, and she was probably in need of an undisturbed sleep. Dawn would soon be coming. He sat himself down on a stone seat and rested his arms on the balcony wall.

He looked across to the moon and up to the stars: this time between night and day always held for him a beautiful but eerie quality of its own. It was an old habit of his, whenever circumstances permitted, to be awake and under the open sky during this last watch before daybreak. He found that in these hours there was a softness of nature abroad which had healing in its touch, and could give, as no other time of day or night, a clear perspective to problems of the mind.

Sitting there, his kammerband and collar loosened, he realized that it was not so much physical fatigue from which he was suffering, as from a longing for mental peace. For years past now he had been dashing about, hither and thither, from one campaign, expedition or state mission to another. It was irony for one of his nature that he had been forced to see many lives without being able to live an uninterrupted one of his own. Even after Padmini's coming, barely two years ago, he had only been able to filch a few odd months to spend with her. He felt that he was being

forced to sail past life without being given sufficient chance to stop and fondle it.

He heard a slight movement behind him and looked round. The light was spilling out from Padmini's door. She stood there, lovely as dawn itself, her arms raised and holding the edges of the parted curtains, her straight, glorious young body silhouetted through the flimsy folds of her night-dress. He went over and took her in his arms.

"Not been sleeping, darling?" he asked tenderly.

"Yes, a little, I think, but I wanted to keep awake till you came."

"I'd hoped you were fast asleep: actually I was sitting here because I didn't like the idea of disturbing you."

"Silly: why there's always lots of time to sleep when you're away and it helps to shorten the time till you return. When you are here, I never want to lose a minute of consciousness."

"Poor little sweetheart. It must be terribly dull for you at times."

"Yes, perhaps. But now, seeing we are together and time is precious, let's sit out here for a little, shall we?"

He led her to the seat and drew her on to his lap.

"That better?" he asked, laying her head on his shoulder.

"Um...m. That's heaven." She drew his lips down to hers and kissed them passionately.

"You know," he told her some minutes later, "there does seem something wrong with a world in which two persons, loving as we do, have so often to be apart."

"It's the price one has to pay for kingship, I suppose," answered Padmini sadly. "Your father is getting old and relies so much on you these days."

"I know he does, and I want to help him all I can. Yet....." he paused awhile and then continued: "yet I doubt if he will ever see things as I do."

"How do you mean exactly?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm convinced all these efforts to form a pan-Rajput confederation against the Muslims are useless."

"Why?"

"The different Rajput clans will never combine for any length of time: there are far too many jealousies among them. My reading of their past history tells me that it is far better to lie low and avoid giving the Muslims an incentive to attack us."

"But they've attacked us in the past."

"Yes, and what did they get out of it?—some pretty hard knocks and just a handful of Bajra corn in return for much expenditure of

men and money." He was silent for a time, then went on: "Don't you see, they've got all the fertile parts of India in their possession. They are not likely to worry about these desert tracks unless we provide some very real incentive."

"Such as?"

"Forming powerful federations, however short-lived, which might think of invading their territory unless broken up and destroyed once and for all."

"I see...Can't you persuade them to your views?"

"Impossible, I fear. My father, the whole clan, every Rajput, looks on fighting as his one real rôle in life: nothing else counts."

"Not even their wives?"

"You know they don't. Women to them are just incidents between fighting, something to be enjoyed with their wine, and, at times, to produce more recruits for their armies."

"But you don't feel like that, beloved?"

"You know I don't."

Both lapsed into silence--the silence which accepts the futility of further words.

Presently Padmini lifted her head and said: "Oh: darling, look. Aren't the colourings just glorious?"

Rattan Singh looked and saw all the east in purple and red, gorgeous, flaming.

"And now we simply must go and have some sleep," he told her and led her into the room.

* * *

It was nearly noon when they woke. Jaysu had brought along clothes for his master and was patiently waiting in another room.

"Are all the guests up yet?" asked Rattan Singh of the old man.

"Most of them. But they'll not be leaving for some hours yet, so there's lots of time for you to dress and have some breakfast. I've ordered your tray to be brought here."

"What would I do without you, Jaysu?" asked Rattan Singh smiling.

"Only fairly well, I'm thinking," replied the old man with a chuckle.

Some little time later, bathed, clothed and fed, Rattan Singh again entered Padmini's apartments.

"I must be off to speed the guests on their way," he told her. "I'll send along a palanquin to take you home. Mind you're not late."

He kissed her and left.

He found most of the guests mounted and ready to be off. "We'll all be back for the

Dassera Festival," they told him. "Till then: Au revoir."

"Au revoir and a safe journey to you all."

He noticed Badul, the ten-year-old son of Uncle Gorah standing near and watching the departing host.

"Hullo Badul, how's your father to-day?"

"Like a bear with a sore head. Mum sent me to wake him up and he threw a boot at me."

Rattan Singh laughed; he could picture the scene. "Pretty tactless of you and Aunt Jodhi. You'd have done well to let him alone." He turned to go and then stopped.

"I'm going to see Padmini now, would you like to come, too?"

"Rather. She and I always played together till you went and married her. Now I hardly ever see her."

"But why not see her whenever you want. I've no objection."

"Haven't you? That's grand." He looked up at Rattan Singh, then added a little shyly: "Will you tell that horrible swine of a eunuch that guards the *Deorhi gate that I have your permission?"

Rattan Singh chuckled. He had a great contempt for the old custom, which required

*The Threshold Gate. Every Rajput Zenana has two gates so set that from the first one cannot see through the second.

these unmanned humans to guard the zenanas, but did not wish to trample on the feelings of his people by doing away with them.

"So you've been trying to get into my zenana, have you, young fellow?"

"Yes..... I miss Padmini so much."

"I see. And you're another of those lads who has fallen victim to her beauty?"

"Of course. Don't you know that the name Padmini in our language means the world's sweetheart?"

"Good gracious!" said Rattan in mock seriousness. "I think I'd better increase the guard." Then, seeing the look of consternation on Badul's face, he added: "But don't worry. I'll tell them to let *you* in. Now come along."

They found Padmini among her sewing maids.

"Hullo Badul," she said smilingly. "I thought you had deserted me entirely." She put an arm through his and noticed that he winced. "What's the matter?"

"Oh: only a bit of a scratch," he told her. "But it's still tender."

Padmini pulled up his sleeve and revealed a jagged and unclean wound on his upper arm.

"Now how did you get that?" demanded.

Badul looked somewhat sheepish, but after a little hesitation admitted: "I had a bang at that beast of a eunuch who guards your door and wouldn't let me in."

"Yes, and?"

"Well, he gave me a good hiding."

Rattan Singh burst out laughing. "I thought," said he, "there was more to the tale than you admitted. You're getting as bad as your father: never happy unless fighting."

"Well, what's a Rajput for but to fight?" demanded Badul.

"Oh lor' " said Rattan Singh. "Always the same old story."

Padmini cleaned the wound, dressed and bandaged it. Presently she loaded the youngster with sweets and sent him off beaming.

"And now, darling," she said sweetly to her husband, "we can be alone together for a bit."

"Yes, and I've quite a lot to talk to you about."

She came over and settled herself down close to Rattan Singh.

"Yes, my lord," she said in feigned awe. "I hope I've not been doing anything to displease Your Highness."

He drew her closer to him and kissed her: "Stop joking and listen."

"I'm all ears."

"You've often told me about your home in Ceylon and how the waves washed against the walls and sang you to sleep." He paused.

"Yes, that plosh-plash is the only thing I miss here."

"I thought so, and I've a little surprise for you."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide.

He continued: "I've built you a little marble palace in the middle of one of the lakes. Of course the waves aren't very big, but still, when there's a breeze, one can hear the 'plosh-plash' as you call it."

"Oh, sweetheart, how perfectly lovely of you to think of such a thing.....Where is it?"

"Not very far; just along the road leading to the *Chaugan. I'm going to take you this afternoon. We can spend a few lovely days together there as I haven't much work at present, for a change."

"How perfectly gorgeous." Her face was radiant.

* The Field of Mars, the arena where the Dassera festivals are held.

The palace which Rattan Singh had been building was, in reality, quite a large and substantial affair. It stood on the north side of and extended the length of the artificial lake, to which later generations have given the name 'Padmini Talao.' Between the palace and the lake was a long flight of steps rimming the water. The 'little marble palace' spoken of by Rattan Singh was a gem of architecture, built up out of the centre of the lake isle-wise. It could only be reached by boat yet stood barely a stone-throw from the steps. It consisted of a small open courtyard, a room, then another courtyard with domed balconies jutting out over the water, then a second room with a domed ceiling. From the first room steps led up to a second storey and, above this again, was a flat roof, walled from prying eyes yet open to the skies. Six centuries have passed and still this building stands, renovated it is true but essentially as originally planned, mute tribute to one of the most lovely but tragic heroines of all times.

Padmini when she saw it was enraptured. She wandered from room to room, upstairs and downstairs. And on the first night spent there, they slept on the flat roof. Nestled in the arms of her man she wondered whether to any other woman in the world had been granted such perfect happiness and content.

"Can I give a party?" she asked Rattan Singh next day.

"Of course. Whom do you want to ask?"

"Oh, only Aunt Jodhi. She's such good fun."

Aunt Jodhi, who was the wife of Uncle Gorah and the mother of Badul, duly arrived next afternoon. She, too, admired the lake palace and said she felt quite at home again now she was on an island. She did not belong to Ceylon, but had spent many years there with her husband.

"How's Badul's arm?" asked Padmini.

Aunt Jodhi knew nothing about it and was told the story. "He's going to turn out just as much of a handful as his father," she sighed. "Rattan, can't you get any fighting for Gorah to do?"

"I'm afraid not, at present, Aunt—the war market for the moment has slumped badly."

"But, good heavens, Aunt," said Padmini astonished, "what on earth do you want war for?"

"To keep Gorah out of mischief. If he doesn't get his regular fighting, he gets as must as an elephant."

Rattan Singh and Padmini rocked with laughter at this intimate disclosure.

"Nothing to laugh about, my dears, I assure you. Your Uncle is the best of good husbands as a rule, but when he's bored with no one to kill, he gives me the hell of a time."

She paused perhaps for sympathy and then continued: "Well, if you won't start a war for him, I'll have to send for one of those pretty little baggages from the *Chakla—what those Muslims call 'Courtesans of the Realm'."

Padmini looked at her aunt aghast. "Do you mean to say," she asked as if unable to believe her ears, "that you would calmly help your husband to be unfaithful to you? You simply can't love him."

"Rubbish, my dear child. Of course I love him: dearly. And I'm quite satisfied he loves me just as much. But when you're my age you'll have learnt that genuine love and marital faithfulness have little to do with each other, at any rate where soldiers are concerned. It's a well-known fact that perils demand to be paid with pleasures, and when soldiers come back from their wars, they turn to women and wine as ducks to water. After a bit of a rest, your Uncle's tremendous energies overflow, and not unnaturally he gets bored with one bed-mate, just as he would if he had always to tussle with one and the same foe."

"Well, I think it's perfectly dreadful," confessed Padmini. "I'd hate Rattan to do a thing like that. And as for providing the temptation, well..."

*The quarter of a town occupied by the filles de joie and to be found in every Indian city and town.

"You won't have to, I expect. Your Rattan is rather different from most other Rajputs. And you may be grateful for that."

"I am."

Talking it over again with Rattan Singh after her aunt had left, Padmini said: "Darling, are all Rajputs like Uncle Gorah?"

"Most of them I'm afraid. Anyhow les filles de joie down the road are kept pretty busy."

"Tell me something about them."

"Well, the establishments they live in are not solely places for vice. One can go there and come away quite unscathed; that's if one wishes to. They serve also as clubs, where a fellow can drop in to enjoy singing and dancing, have a drink, smoke a hookah or listen to the latest gossip of the town. Of course, if one wants the other thing, the girls will always oblige."

"I see.....But I do feel sorry for Aunt Jodhi."

"No need, I think. She seems perfectly happy with her philosophy. And she's probably right in her circumstances."

"Anyhow I hope Badul turns out a better man."

"I'm afraid the signs are not good. I think I'd better send for tigers and bears, to keep

"Yes, do," agreed his wife "That's the next best thing, perhaps, since they both seem unable to live a peaceful life."

So father and son were packed off with a party of shikaries and half a dozen elephants to kill tigers and cool their ardour. They returned about a month later with a load of skins to prove their prowess. Both were lean and dried of skin for the weather had been unusually hot even for a Rajputana summer. Young Badul had been blooded in the chase and his father was full of praises for his pluck. "The young devil finished off one large hog with his dagger," he announced proudly.

III

RAWUL Samar Singh and his heir were sitting together in the Sun Balcony (the Suraj Gokhra) of the palace. All day the sky had been overcast, so, as always on such days and fulfilling an ancient custom, the Sun of the Hindus was showing his countenance to his people that they might feel the sun still shone. Both were in the mood for talking.

"My son, are the preparations for the campaigning season well advanced?" inquired the Rawul.

"Yes, Father, I think everything is as you would wish it to be. I've had to replace a

few of the elephants and horses on account of age or disablement in recent fights."

"Good. As you know this is a matter to which in the past I have always given my personal attention. But now, like those elephants and horses, I have grown old, and so perforce must resign this duty to you."

"Don't worry, Father, I'm only too glad to do anything I can to relieve you of some of your burdens. Yet....." he stopped abruptly.

His father cast him a look of inquiry. "Continue," he invited.

It's something I've wanted to talk to you about for a long time. It's like this. While I quite agree that we must always be ready to defend our heritage, are these yearly campaigns of aggression really necessary or even right?"

The Rawul moved his position to face his son more fully.

"Strange words for a Rajput! Explain yourself more fully, my son."

Rattan Singh spoke slowly, deliberately. He was trying to put into the most convincing form all those thoughts, which of late had been thrusting themselves so incessantly into his hours of quiet thinking.

"I feel," he began at length, "that kingship is a trust, a sort of stewardship for the welfare of those over whom it is exercised.

This is not a new idea, I know. But the point is: do you, my Father, agree?"

"Yes, so far at least. Continue."

"The people of this realm, thanks to the strength of your arm, have lived secure for many years. Yet....." he hesitated, feeling the Rawul's eyes fixed intent upon him. "Yet, what of their welfare? Are, for instance, their best interests served by these yearly campaigns fought, not for their protection, but for plunder or the mere love of fighting?"

The Rawul cleared his throat. In his voice was no hostility, but, for the first time in his life, it made Rattan Singh feel that he and his father were strangers to each other.

"I should not like to think, Rattan, that acceptance of the fair Padmini's *cocoanut has made you soft."

"To even think so, were unfair," replied his son without heat. "Have I on any occasion since my marriage degraded my sword?"

The old Rawul leant forward and placed his hand on the other's knee. "No," he said in a gentle and courteous voice. "Never. I readily concede that."

"Well, then?"

"My many years seem to tell me that in each Rajput's blood flows a restless desire for

*To accept the cocoanut signifies among Hindus an agreement to wed.

power, which dies only when he dies. And power gained but left to rust is as desire without vitality—the butt of all men's scorn."

"But need power be used only for destruction? To me it seems a gift by which man is enabled rather to build up, to beautify, to make happy and prosperous those around him: even as a means to put down the curse of war."

For a space both were silent. Then the Rawul, in a strangely silent voice, said: "You half persuade me, dear boy. Can you suggest any means to attain this end?"

"Refuse to have anything to do with the Rajput Confederacy and make peace with the Sultan. Not a peace which would recognize him as master: that would be black disgrace. But an understanding which says: leave me alone and I will leave you alone—a pact of mutual non-aggression, one might call it."

"And should the Sultan agree, but attack other Rajput States?"

"Were it wilful aggression on his part, we should still go to their aid. But if it were aggression answering aggression, then we should, after giving fair warning, stand aside, for, if we can get peace, so can they."

"The idea is so novel to me, I must have time to think it over. Come and discuss it

again in a few days' time." And the Rawu rose and went into his room.

Rattan Singh watched him leave and then went in search of Padmini. He wanted to tell her all that had passed between him and his father. Probably she only of all the thousands within the fort, would understand.

He found her in one of the little balconies built out over the water. The lake's surface was ruffled by breaths of wind which fretted the water. She was sitting, listening to the ripples splashing against the stonework.

"And you think that your father really will agree to your plans?" she asked, after hearing all he had to tell.

"I don't think we should be too optimistic. He'll certainly discuss it fully with the others, and you can imagine how, for instance, Uncle Gorah will oppose the notion."

"I can; not to mention Aunt Jodhi. The idea of having to spend the rest of her days with—what were the words she used? oh, yes—a must elephant would appal her." She chuckled merrily at the recollection.

"You see, darling," went on Rattan Singh, "I hate the Muslims just as much as everyone else does, and I'll fight them to the death if need there must be. But fighting just for fighting's sake seems perfectly horrible to me. War is a sort of eclipse, which descends upon

the land from time to time to darken it. When the darkness lifts, I revel in the sunshine, the beauties around us, the song of birds. They—they prefer, it seems to me, to live in the twilight all the time."

"Old Jaysu calls you the poet-warrior. Don't you know that? And I believe he is right."

"Your Uncle will probably call me a Bannia's bastard, when Father tells him my plans," he smiled.

"He'd better not," said his wife vehemently.

Contrary to their expectations, the Rawul kept the matter strictly to himself. A few days later he reopened the discussion.

"I don't know if it's due to tolerance begotten of experience or merely from a desire for comfort due to old age," he began whimsically, "but I've got to admit that the more I think about your ideas, the more I like them."

"Thanks, Father."

"Perhaps the best way to test them will be to send an envoy to the Sultan to find out how he regards them."

"Splendid! Whom will you send?"

"Useless to send a Rajput on mission: perhaps Balji will be the best to go."

Rattan Sing nodded. He entertained good opinion of this minister's ability—Magal by caste—but did not rate his integrity high. Yet he could think of no more suitable envoy. Balji was shrewd, quick in debate, trained courtier, and to be trusted to be able to grasp the issues at stake. He pictured him now standing before the Sultan stating the case. Fat, oily and obsequious: not an inspiring figure certainly, but he recalled how Balji's face puffy and pock-marked when at rest, had way of suddenly lighting up with a smile which disarmed one by its very unexpectedness. Intrigue and politics were related. Rattan Sing was forced to conclude, Balji was the best choice open. Yet, with so much at stake, he would have preferred sending someone a little less material in outlook, someone whose honesty of purpose he could trust a little more. These Magals, he told himself, were slippery as the devil, and he recalled the well-known Hind couplet concerning them:

By a Magal good faith never yet has been
master'd:

If it has, then his mother gave birth to
a bastard.

Balji was summoned and told of the mission to be entrusted to him. He showed no reluctance to go, but made it clear that he would require to be well supplied with presents and funds if he were to be successful. He mentioned that, by lucky chance, he used to be

well acquainted with a slave of the name of Kafur, whom he understood now to be in high favour with the Sultan. He expressed himself ready to start whenever he was required to do so. It was made clear to him that the matter was to be kept a secret at least till the Sultan's reply was known.

A few days later, giving out that he was going to attend a wedding in Alwar, he departed.

Rattan Singh realized that it might be weeks before Balji returned and he found it hard to restrain his impatience. He was glad when the Dassera approached and he could forget all else in the heavy duties of preparing for that festival.

The countryside was looking its best. Viewed from the fort the flat lands around seemed to be wearing a coat of many greens. Here and there they were studded by sheets of water reflecting the turquoise blue of the skies mirrored in them. From among the grasses and boulders on the hillsides partridges were calling, and in the flawless blue above hawks wheeled ceaselessly. Just for a short time the omnipresent sands were hidden beneath a riot of young crops or natural verdure. And in the evening of these days, his duties over, Rattan would sit with Padmini, sometimes on the roof of her lake-palace, sometimes on some secluded bastion of the fort, watching the sun sinking

behind the horizon like a red globe of bronze cast back into the furnace, and up-flinging splashes of flaming cloud.

Once or twice the Rawul joined them. For nearly seventy years he had seen the 'Loo' blow up in sheets of dust, annual precursors of the monsoon; had felt the first splash of the rains which brought relief to the grilling heat of summer; had watched the crops mellow from green to gold under an autumn sun. Yet for him autumn had meant only the advent of another 'open' season, when killing would commence. And now, in the autumn of his own days' with a new vision implanted in his mind for the first time, he began to realize that there might be other ways of living than the one to which he and his brethren clung with such obstinacy. In his heart was born of a sudden a great tenderness for this son of his—a tenderness such as he had never before believed himself capable of feeling for any human being.

It was on one of these evenings, not many days later, that just as the mauve twilight was turning to green, the watchman from above the Ram Pol gate announced: "a large party of horsemen approaching."

Rattan Singh ascended the steps to the top of the battlements and stood there looking out westwards. He saw clouds of dust, and presently watched the party cross the river by the Gambhiri Bridge. Once through the winding streets of

Talehti, they dismounted and stopped to drink of the cool waters dropping sheer down the cliff, the overflow from the Gomukh, the Cow-mouth reservoir, situated high above and within the fort.

A little later he could see them begin the ascent, and guessed them to be Rana Lakshman, his sons and followers. He saw them pass through the outer gates, the Bheron Pol and Hanuman Pol, then missed them at the bend. Presently they came in sight again, and passed the Ganesh Pol. He went down to meet them at the main gate.

"Welcome, my cousins," he said, embracing the Rana. "I hope the ride has not been too fatiguing."

"We all feel a bit stiff after months of inactivity," the Rana told him. "But we're always glad to be here for Dassera."

Grooms took their sweating horses, loosened their girths. Rattan Singh led the way to the Palace.

Late into the night and from dawn next day till dusk, he was at the gate welcoming clansmen as they arrived, dusty and hot.

On the first of the nine days preceding the Dassera, the tenth and great day of the Hindu month of Asoj, after fasting, ablution and prayer on the part of the Rawul and all his guest-

the great two-edged khanda of Bapa was brought forth from the armoury. receiving the homage of the court, it was in procession to the temple of Deoji and handed over to the Raj Jogi, the chief monastic militant adorers of Heri, the battle. These ascetics, forsaking all lusts, kept themselves fighting-fit and the shock-troops of the Mewar army. The famous sword was then placed by the Raj on the altar of the temple, to be the object of continuous worship and adoration through the whole nine days.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the drums boomed out from an upper verandah of the Tripolia gate, the call for all clansmen to assemble. A little later, after sacrificing a buffalo, the Rawul and his cavalcade proceeded to the temple of Deogi, to offer two pieces of silver and a cocoanut and do homage to the sword of Bapa Rawul.

On the second and third days there were visits to other temples, each requiring their special sacrifices, performed by different Rajas in turn. And woe betide the clansman who could not decapitate cleanly and at one blow, for anything less might bring ill upon the whole clan. Amba Mata, the universal mother, delights in the blood of buffaloes and goats, while Harsid Mata has a preference for rams rather than goats.

On the fourth day custom required the Rawul himself to be the sacrificer. Seated on a throne borne upon the shoulders of retainers and surrounded by his vassals, he approached a buffalo tethered near the temple. In the days of his strength the Rawul had never failed to bury his arrow feather-deep in the victim's flank. But on this occasion it scarcely penetrated beyond the steel point and drew from him the exclamation: "I draw not the bow as in the days of yore." It was Rattan Singh who stepped forward and gave the coup-de-grâce to the terrified beast.

The morning of the fifth day witnessed an elephant fight at the Chaugan—the field of Mars. Uncle Gorah had been feeding up one big tusker and now challenged the Rawul's own elephant, Genda. It was a gory fight.

The two huge beasts were brought up to face each other over a thick stone wall. For a time it was a duel of trunks, but, as Genda's temper rose, the wall gave way and the battle ended in Genda chasing his opponent ignominiously out of the ring.

"Hell," said Uncle Gorah eyeing his champion with disgust. "All the good food I put into that miserable brute only seems to have benefitted his legs! Take him away."

In the afternoon more sacrifices and, amid the welter of bloodshed, the chief priest of the Jains, a sect who hold all life sacred, came for-

ward to beg the life of some of the victims still awaiting death. His request was granted, as it had been at each Dassera since time immemorial.

On the sixth, seventh and eighth days more visits to more temples, more processions and sacrifices. On the seventh the ascetics were feasted on rice and sweetmeats. Watching them gorge till their bellies bulged, Rattan Singh marvelled how such gluttony could be reconciled with the abstemiousness to which these men were pledged.

On the last morning there was no procession. The horses from the royal stables and those of all the clansmen were taken to the lake constructed by the ancient Parmar founder of the fort and known as the Chitrang Mori's tank. At the water side they were bathed by their grooms and thereafter, caparisoned in gaily-decorated saddles, silver-studded headstalls, necklets of bells and a plume on each head, led before the Rawul and his guests to receive their homage. The ceremony ended by the Rawul stowing gifts of money on the Master of Horse, ferries and grooms.

In the early afternoon, the great drums having thrice sounded, a grand procession was formed to bring home the sword. Elephants, horses, camels in rich trappings, and a 'nishan', a company of troops with band, the crimson banner of Mewar, and the emblem of the royal

house, a sun of gold on a sable field—all were there.

When the arrival of the sword in the palace courtyard was announced to the Rawul, he descended to receive it from the hands of the Raj Jogi. In the evening he presented the Raj Jogi with a robe of honour, filled the bowl of those priests, who had performed the nine days' austerities, with gold and silver coins, and once again feasted the Jogis. Thereafter all the Rajput brethren dined as one big family. It was only at a very late hour that the party broke up.

The morning of Dassera, the tenth day of Asoj broke fine. This is the day commemorative of the departure of the deified Rama with his forces to rescue his wife, Seeta, held prisoner in Ceylon. Consequently it is deemed by all Rajputs as a fortunate day for warlike enterprises. The chief ceremony was the releasing of a blue-jay, the bird sacred to Rama. This was performed on the Chaugan in the presence of the whole garrison. Thereafter the royal party returned to the palace, amid the noise of fireworks and rockets and the banging of many drums, to prepare for the morrow, the great day of rejoicing which would bring this annual festival to an end.

In the evening Rattan Singh slipped away to spend a short time with Padmini:

"You must be worn out, darling, after all these days of rush," she told him, removing his

pagri and pressing her cool hands over his eyes and forehead."

"Yes, I shan't be sorry when the last guest leaves. I'm beginning to think moderation in strong drink is a mistake. Your uncle never seems to flag for a moment though he's almost twice my age."

"But think of how he'll flop when it's over," she reminded him smilingly.

They sat on together for a time, talking little, completely content in each other's nearness.

At length Padmini said: "I've got a glorious heron's plume for you to wear in your pagri to-morrow. I've had it dyed scarlet."

She got up and later returned with the plume. Deftly she pinned it into his pagri and made him try it on. "Yes, that looks splendid," she told him and kissed him. "Be sure, when you pass in procession to-morrow, to look up at my window. I'll be there with eyes only for you."

"And when they've all gone, sweetheart, we'll have a few more of these wonderful days just to ourselves in the island palace," he promised her, as he left.

* * *

Another day.

The deep resonant notes of the great drums above, and the shorter, sharper notes of the kettle-drums below ; the neighing of horses, the blare of trumpets ; shouting of orders ; the jingling of harness—the procession, bound for the Chaugan, was getting under way.

The Rawul, wearing the finest of his jewels, sat in a gold howdah upon Genda's back. Around him was a throng of spearmen and armed retainers. Next came Rattan Singh on another elephant, dressed in a bright brocade and with Padmini's scarlet plume waving above his pagri. Then all the leading nobles, mounted on horses, gaily attired, heading a great mass of Rajputs whose lances with their pennons and shining accoutrements made a brave show under the morning sun.

The streets through which they passed were decked with flowers and branches of trees. From upper windows hung rich carpets, shawls and costly materials to do honour to their ruler, Now and again, where space permitted it, a Rajput cavalier would break away from the ranks to 'witch the world with noble horsemanship'. Or as the band struck up another tune, the led-horses, jingling with bells, would lift their fore-quarters in lively imitation of barbaric dance.

Arrived at the Chaugan all dismounted and a Darbar was held. Seated on a low dais with canopy above, the Rawul received the 'nazars'

of his nobles and clansmen. They filed past him in seemingly endless array, to bow and offer on their shields the gift of coins prescribed for each according to his status. Meanwhile the Bards raise the 'song of praise', telling of the glories of the past, and the Nautch girls sing

The last ceremony was the naming of those horses purchased since the last Dassera. As they were led past by their grooms the Master of Horse announced the names—Baj Raj, royal steed; Hymor, chief of horses; Manika, the gem; Bujra, the thunderbolt and twenty more.

On returning to the palace, the Rawul made gifts—to his chiefs silken Balabunds to adorn their head-dress and special mark of the sovereign's favour; daggers, swords; shields and many other tokens of esteem. For everyone, however lowly, there was a new pagri. The day ended with a grand banquet and feeding of the poor.

IV

RATTAN Singh burst in to Padmini's room, excited as a school-boy.

"Balji's back and the Sultan has agreed," he told her breathlessly.

"How splendid, darling, how perfectly splendid! I felt sure he would."

"But the battle's only half won; we've still got to deal with the others here," he re-

minded her, suddenly remembering that as yet they knew nothing of the plan.

"That's true. But surely they won't oppose both your father and you?"

"Depends on the leaders. If we could only win a few of them over to our side."

"Let's try. I'll begin with Uncle Gorah. Send for him now and leave him to me."

Rattan Sing went off and a little later Gorah arrived.

"Well my dear niece," he said breezily, "and what can your old uncle do for you to-day? Haven't been having a row with Rattan, or any nonsense like that, I hope."

"No, nothing so silly," she assured him, and added: "Now sit down, I want to talk to you."

"Right, get me a nicely lighted hookah, and I'm yours for as long as you like."

The hookah was produced, and Gorah took a long pull to test it.

"Yes, that's something like a good smoke. Now proceed, sweet child."

Briefly, but missing no essential detail, Padmini told her story.

"And now, Uncle," she concluded, "it's possible some of the clan may not see eye to eye with us, and we want you on our side."

"But why pitch on me of all people?" asked aghast. "How do you expect me to have any sympathy for ideas like these." He paused with his jaw moving up and down; finally he blurted out: "And what the hell am I going to do for the rest of my life? Sit around counting my beads like some blasted priest, or what?"

Despite the seriousness of the moment Padmini could not restrain a smile at the thought of the Uncle Gorah telling his beads.

"You'll find lots to amuse yourself," she soothed him. "Rattan will see you get all the hunting you want."

"Pah--hunting!"

"Oh, Uncle darling," she pleaded, "you've been a perfect dear to me all my life. Won't you give me your help now, when I want it so badly?"

He was silent.

"Or at any rate, at least promise you won't oppose Rattan's plans?"

"All right," he grunted. "I promise that much."

"Thank you Uncle. Now I'm going to kiss you."

"No you don't," he said turning away hurriedly. "That pretty face of yours has been my undoing already. If I let you kiss me, then God knows what further folly I might promise." And he left her without another word.

Padmini sat down. She felt triumphant but exhausted. "That's the hardest nut cracked," she comforted herself. "Poor old Uncle, we must make it up to him in every way we can. But I do hope he won't go completely must—that would be too terrible for Aunt Jodhi."

Down below Gorah ran into Badul. The look on his parent's usually jovial face caused his son to inquire if anything was wrong.

"Anything wrong.....anything wrong? By Ramji, I should say there is. Padmini and Rattan seem to have gone quite mad."

"What are they doing?"

"Better go and ask Padmini herself. But look out or she may cover you with ashes, give you a bowl and turn you into a sadhu."

Badul was entirely mystified, but pulled himself together, as he approached the zenana entrance, sufficiently to put his nose in the air and swagger past his old enemy the eunuch.

"Fat son of a bitch!" he shouted back when he felt he was sufficiently far to be out of reach of that dignitary's toe, and disappeared round the corner.

Padmini was not surprised to see him; she felt pretty sure he would come. She had also heard his impolite remark to the eunuch.

"Look here," she told him severely, "I like seeing you, but I don't tolerate behaviour like that to my servants."

"Sorry, I won't say it again.....but I can't help thinking it, can I?"

Padmini smiled. "I suppose not, you being what you are." She smiled again and asked: "Now what brings you here this morning?"

"Dad says you and Rattan have both gone mad."

"Seems that politeness is not a strong point in your branch of the family.....What reason did he give for this statement?"

"None. He said I'd better ask you myself."

"Right. Now listen." And she went over the same ground with him as she had with his father.

When at length she ceased speaking, Badul's expression reminded her strikingly of the one that Uncle Gorah's face had worn only a short time earlier.

"Oh, Badul" she said appealingly. "I did think you would be on your side."

"You know," he assured her gravely. "I love you and Rattan so much, I'd even give up fighting for you."

"That's grand of you." She put her arm round him and hugged him close.

"But I say, Padmini, what about father?" he asked, breaking away. "He'll just go mad

with nothing to do and play hell down there in the brothels."

"Badul, I'm shocked at you. A boy of your age ought not even to know that such places exist."

Badul winked solemnly.

* * *

Later when Rattan Singh came back, Padmini told him of her successes.

"Good for you," he said. "Father has called a clan meeting, so the more we win over to our side before it takes place, the better.

"When is it to be?"

"Next week."

"Well, anyway, let's forget it for a bit. I've got a surprise for you."

She clapped her hands and a famous singer, Catalani, entered together with a zither player whose skill was known throughout Rajputana.

"Now, Sadoola," she told the instrumentalist. "You let the Prince hear that lovely 'tan' you played for me yesterday. You know the one: it goes like this," and she hummed the first few bars of an Indian symphony.

The veteran musician arranged himself on a carpet before them, his legs tucked under him, his zither pressed against his left shoulder. For a time he tuned the strings, tightening one, pulling another. Then his fingers began to

wander up and down the key-board, bringing forth such sweet music that Rattan Singh felt the cares of the world dropping away, one by one, and a sense of utter peace stealing over him.

Sadoola finished on a low soft note which died lingeringly. In the hush which followed Rattan Singh brought himself back with a jerk from another world. "Wah! wah!" he praised. "I could listen to music like that for ever."

Then Catalani sang. She had a superb contralto voice of great range. The song she chose was called the 'Megh'—the cloud song—and was full of melody and the softness of rainy season after summer glare.

"That was a grand thought of yours," Rattan Singh told Padmini when the concert was over. "I feel a different man now."

"I thought it would do you good. Your face has had such a strained look lately."

That same evening Rattan Singh heard other music. He was passing through the bazaar on his way to his palace, when the high-pitched notes of a familiar voice broke upon his hearing. They came from the upper room of a house of ill-fame and were unmistakably those of Uncle Gorah in his cups. He was doing the singing himself, for a change. Rattan Singh remained standing below the window and heard:

My days of war are over,
My sword I've thrown away,
I've bought a brand new bible
And beads to help me pray:
I'm going to be a Sadhu,
Forsake both war and wine.
Oh, won't you come and join me,
The life is simply fine!

This was followed by loud laughter and then by some screaming as Uncle Gorah, apparently executing a charge upon the ladies, gave vent to the Rajput war-cry of Hur! Hur!

"The old reprobate!" said Rattan Singh to the world at large, and went on.

As he turned down the road leading to the palace, he heard coming from high up on the Ram Pol gate the strident blare of the sentry's 'turai', and the long reverberating notes of his "Hem! Hem."—"All's Well!"

"I hope it is," he said devoutly.

* * *

The Hall of Audience was filled to overflowing: the special call to all clansmen to attend had been well answered. On the entry of the Rawul, all rose and bowed as he passed up the carpeted aisle to the throne.

"Why have we all been sent for?" asked Rana Lakshman of Gorah, who was sitting next to him.

"To tell you we're going to sack Delhi, I expect," replied that worthy with a twinkle in his eye.

Further talk was interrupted by the Rawul rising from his seat to make his address. He spoke slowly but with a clarity and force, which taxed obviously his failing strength.

"My noble chiefs and brothers. I know but scarcely like to recall the number of moons that have passed since you placed me on the royal cushion of Mewar. During that time I have led you in many battles, and always to victory."

"Wah: wab:"—this from a hundred throats.

"We have beaten off the Muslim invader each time he has threatened our liberty: we have kept intact our realm: at times we have added to it."

He paused and then continued: "But, if a people are to thrive, there must be, in the weaving of their history, some balance between the warp of war and the woof of peace: an undue amount of either will result in a fabric ill-fitted to endure. In our own case I see too great spacing of the woof. With this realization in mind I approached the Sultan of Delhi."

The Rawul stopped and looked around his audience. On every face he saw written expectancy mixed with surprise.

"I approached the Sultan of Delhi," he repeated. "And I am happy to be able to

announce to you this day, that he and I, on behalf of our respective realms, have entered into an agreement that, for a space of ten years, neither shall commit any hostile act against the other."

"Do you think the Muslim's word is to be trusted?" asked Rana Lakshman.

"I can only say that I hope it is. If not, then we can fight him, aye and beat him as we have done before. But, assuming he does honour his pledge, then to establish a period of full peace, we have only to consider those other Rajput States around us. To them I send this message: For ten years also our armies will not invade nor even menace you. Keep what you have and enjoy it. And during those years, when wars are stilled, we shall do for our people the many thing which circumstances so far have not permitted us to do. We shall build dams to water the fields, open markets to sell their goods, build roads, develop industries."

He sat down and Rana Lakshman Singh stood up.

"Bapuji," he said addressing the Rawul direct and in the title which recognized him as father of his people. "We have heard your words and know not what to say. We are a race of soldiers with a record of fighting which stretches far back into the dawn of time. If each one of us now is to hang up his lance in his hall, convert his sword into a plough-share,

and make a basket of his buckler, then what shall come but the prostration of our every virtue?"

The Chief of Saloombra next spoke.

"Forgive me, Sire, but I too grow old. And never till this day have I heard such words spoken by Rajput lips. Extinguish in the Rajputs their martial virtues, and soon they will cease to respect themselves."

"Wah! Wah!" came support from the crowd.

"Your turn, Rattan," said his father in his ear. "I've done all I can. Now you try."

"My brothers. I think in part you have misunderstood His Highness's words. There is no question of disarming or disbanding the forces. In a land so disturbed, it would be folly not to remain on guard. Garrisons will be maintained, our swords kept sharpened, military exercises carried out. But should an interlude of peace result from my father's efforts, as he hopes, then when it ends we may expect to be immeasurably stronger and better equipped than before to meet what follows. I appeal to you all to give him your loyal support."

But the clamour was not stilled. "Trying to turn us into a lot of Banias"; "what are we to do kicking our idle heels all the time"; "lead us on foray as you've done each year"—these and other expressions of dissension could be heard above the general buzz of excited talk

Suddenly Gorah got up and walked out into the centre. His face was red, his jaw was set. He glared round as if looking for someone to attack, and then began to roar at all.

"Shame on you all," he cried. "Shame. Will you leave it to one, who does not even belong to your tribe, to come to the aid of your King? Well, for two years now I've fought side by side with you, and you know the strength of my arm. Learn now the strength of my tongue, you blood-thirsty, swashbuckling set of ruffians. You've got the best and bravest king in India. For years he has guided your policy, led the way and always with success. Now he tells you that a period of peace is necessary, and just because for a time there may be no loot, you, Banias and sons of Banias that you are at heart, start to squeal. Hark now: this peace is necessary; your king has said so, and peace it is going to be whether you like it or not." He expanded his chest, coughed and concluded: "And if anyone here is against peace, let him come outside and I'll hammer him till he screams for it."

It began with a titter and rose to a roar of laughter as he returned to his seat. "Good old Gorah. Told us the plain truth. Right—we'll all be good, peace-loving lads like Bapuji wants us to be. Wah! Wah!"

Rana Lakshman Singh raised his hand for quiet and advancing to the throne, bent down and embraced the knee of his over-lord between his two hands.

"Bapuji," he said. "We owe you an apology. Perhaps it was the very unexpectedness of your words that took us by surprise. On behalf of all the clan I pledge our unswerving loyalty to you and your house, and undertake to abide by any instructions you may deem fit to issue."

So overwhelmed was the old Rawul that he found himself unable to utter words: he had to content himself with making appreciative gestures.

That which Rattan Singh had said would be a miracle, had actually come to pass.

* * *

"Uncle Gorah," said Padmini late that evening when she had heard all that had passed. "I always thought you were a hero, but what you did to-day was the bravest act of your life. I simply don't know how to thank you."

"Better give me that kiss you tried to buy me with a few days ago," he laughed. "I've gone and sold myself, sentimental old fool that I am, even though I refused the price, so I might just as well have it now."

He received his reward and then remarked a little ruefully: "I fear I hardly deserved that, for it has been a case of *'Kapoor ka sati ka kya faidah'."

* * *

*Where is the merit in suttee if the victim has been drugged?

Days and weeks of planning and organising meetings with village headmen, passing of plans for roadways and irrigation schemes, interviews with bankers—into all this and more Rattan Singh threw himself with an energy which communicated itself to others around him, despite the fact that his outlook was incomprehensible to them. In their view the Banias, the merchant class, were a necessary evil but deserving of no consideration. They quoted to each other many a saying about these people, whom they loathed and despised: "The rogue cheats strangers, the Bania cheats his friends"; or: "Never trust the son of a Bania. He will keep you pleased and pretend to be your most humble servant; but he'll part you from all you possess"; and, most sarcastic of all: "A man who has a Bania for a friend, has no need of an enemy."

As for the tillers of the land, what possible good could come out of studying their welfare? They were a race which bore the brand of vengeance on their foreheads. Just as Cain had been cursed by the Almighty, so were the cultivators of India by god Rama, as a class whom no lenity could render honest or contented. They recalled the story.

When, before his deification, Rama left his earthly kingdom for Ceylon, he instructed his minister to foster the cultivators, that he might hear no complaints on his return. Determined to guard against all cause of complaint, his

minister reversed the grain-measure, taking the share of the crown from the smaller end, exactly one-half of what was sanctioned by immemorial usage. When Rama returned the cultivators assembled at each stage of the journey and complained of the innovations of the minister. "What has he done?"..... "Reversed the grain measure."..... The king dismissed them with his curse as "a race whom no favour could conciliate, and who belonged to no one."

As for Uncle Gorah, he lounged idly in the sun, looking on at what, he told himself, was largely the fruit of his own idiotic behaviour. Sometimes he cursed himself, but more often he just laughed. "Sure there's no fool like an old fool," he kept repeating to anyone who would stop to listen to him. At others he would break out into the song of his own composition:

I'm going to be a Sadhu,
Forsake both war and wine:
Oh, won't you come and join me?
The life is simply fine!

V

A fantastic moon had changed the work around into a stage, the sky was a canopy of blue velvet, and from somewhere in the distance floated a slant of music and the rhythmical beat of 'tablas', the little hand-drums of the East.

Sitting together in the shadows of a balcony overhanging the lake, Rattan Singh held Padmini in his arms. Never, it seemed to him, would he cease to marvel at how soft a woman's body could be or how intoxicating the perfume of her breath. Such happiness could not last, he felt, it was too rich, too full.

"If only this could go on for ever," he sighed.

"And why shouldn't it?"

"Simply because, I suppose, that then there would be no need of a future paradise." And he held her still closer.

They sat on, unable to tear themselves away, so exquisite was the feeling that possessed them. The moon shimmering on the water, the stars now brighter in the vault above, here and there little moon-washed islands of clouds, the splash of ripples on the lake-side, the silence—it caught at their hearts and filled their eyes.

* * *

Someone was coming up the stairs. They could hear him groping his way along the dark passages. Presently Rattan Singh heard his name called. He got up and went to the door.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Jaysu, my Prince."

"What brings you here at this hour of the night?"

"Ill tidings, I regret. Your father has been taken suddenly sick, and is calling for you."

Rattan Singh went back and told Padmini, "I must go at once," he said. "I'll send Jaysu to give you news from time to time. Au revoir, sweetheart." And he left.

When he reached the Rawul's apartments the Raj Vaid, the court physician, was already there. His medicine bag lay open on the floor, its contents spread out—balls of dried cow-dung, lizard and snake skins, porcupine quills, tiger's claws, hair and teeth of bears, monkeys' skulls, dried umbilical cords and all the other accessories of his profession. The Vaid had his fingers on the Rawul's pulse and was intoning incantations and prayers. Rattan Singh's glance caught his eyes and asked a question.

"He's weak, very weak," replied the Vaid. "I'm going to brew him some broth of dried tiger's flesh. That should strengthen him."

The old Rawul turned his head towards his son. "Send this fool away," he whispered. "Does he think that by his nostrums he can stop the turnings of the wheel of fate?"

The Vaid picked up his bag and left hurriedly. He knew the stubbornness of his master, when once his mind was fixed.

"Send for the Raj Guru (the King's confessor)," the Rawul said in a low voice.

A little later he arrived, blinking in the sudden light with his aged and rheumy eyes.

"Guruji," asked the Rawul. "What did Menu, the royal law-giver of our race, command that a king should do when near his end?"

"He commanded, Sire, that, in such circumstances, the king must bestow on the priests all his riches accumulated from legal fines; and, having duly committed his kingdom to his son, seek death in battle, or, if there be no war, by abstaining from food."

"I half regret that peace treaty with the Sultan," the Rawul murmured, trying to force a smile. "But never mind, there is the other way."

He was silent for a time, trying, it seemed, to gather strength. After a few minutes his lips began to move, but Rattan Singh had to bend down to catch the words.

"Go, my son, and wake Balji. Take his accounts and put aside all legal fines for distribution to the Brahmins to-morrow. Then return and bring those nobles who are at present here on duty."

Rattan Singh got up and left. It was nearly dawn when he returned with Gorah and three other Sardars-in-waiting.

The Rawul lay with his eyes closed, his cheeks pallid, almost transparent, his breath coming slowly and irregularly. They stood on

each side of his couch looking down in mute sorrow, unwilling perhaps to take their eyes off this beloved master in case he should slip away from them.

Presently the Rawul roused himself and began to speak. The short sleep had strengthened his voice.

"I have called you here to thank you for your loyal services and to bid you good-bye."

Gorah began to sob unashamedly. The voice went on: "As commanded by Lord Menu, I have distributed wealth to the Brahmins. There remains only, before I set out on my journey to the land of the sun, one more act, and to this I call you to bear witness."

He took Rattan Singh's hand in his and said, slowly and solemnly: "To you, my dear son, I now entrust the governance of my realm. That you will faithfully and honourably fulfil that high office I am sure; that your reign may be long, happy and prosperous is my prayer."

He closed his eyes again as if exhausted. Rattan Singh and the Sardars stood looking down upon the stricken king. Then one by one they stole out of the room, leaving father and son alone together.

As saffron dawn broke, the word passed quickly from mouth to mouth: "The King is dying." Crowds collected outside the palace gates to be told: "He has given over his

kingdom to the Prince: he sinks fast," and then to be told again and again as the hours passed: "The sands of his life are running out." Some felt impelled to make their way through silent streets and from the great courtyard of the palace to stare up at windows behind which lay, never more to be seen, the martial bearded figure they had seen so often leading his troops out to battle, returning with the spoils and captives, holding his court, dispensing justice or just seated upon his elephant on some high festival such as Dassera. To most of them he represented in his long life all that they knew or could remember of great and stirring events.

Special messengers, Harkaras, mounted on swift camels, were sent to all parts of Mewar to summon the clansmen. Prayers for the passing of the royal soul were said in every temple of the land to which the news had reached.

Rattan Singh scarcely left the sick-room for the three days during which, sometimes conscious for short periods, the Rawul lingered on. Now and again Padmini, insisting on her husband taking a few hours of rest, would take his place. Once the Rawul opened his eyes to see her by his side. "Beloved daughter," he whispered and took her hand in his. There she let it rest and would not withdraw it though after a time she suffered agonies of cramp.

Sitting, hour after hour, in the dimly lighted room, Rattan Singh's thoughts moved over the whole course of his life; waves of

remembrance broke over him with always his father the centre of the picture. For the first time perhaps he realized to what extent he had at all times relied upon this stalwart figure. Outwardly not given to show affection, his father had an innate courtesy and readiness to understand which made him seem so human, so approachable. Sadly he looked into a future where this well-beloved figure would be but a memory. The prospect seemed at the moment a vacuous, empty one. He sighed and turned his thoughts to other things.

Thank God, he told himself, that Mother died first. It was going to be hard enough to watch the flames consume one loved body. Had she survived, certainly she must have insisted upon sharing the funeral pyre with her dead lord. He remembered vaguely the passing of his grandfather and the self-immolation in the funeral fires of no less than five of his wives. He had been very young at the time but shuddered at the memories those thoughts now conjured up; the sickly smell of burning human flesh came back to him, causing a sensation of nausea. He knew that others regarded suttee as a grand and noble act, one that every true Rajputni should welcome as the great and final act of her devotion. But to his logical and sensitive mind, suttee had always seemed a lastly thing, and he never passed the Mahasati, the place of sacrifice near the Ram Pol gate, without feeling a sense of the futility, the

sadness of such tragic folly. He recalled now that the only time he had ever really been angry with Jaysu, was when one day the old man had taken him into this hallowed spot and, lifting him up on to the platform of one of the *chhatris, had bade him count the number of suttees depicted on the central pillar. There had been nine of these poor, tragic figures.

Then his thoughts drifted back to his father lying there so still, so quiet. It seemed almost impossible that this could be the same masterful Chief, who for years had kept his turbulent nobles in order and discipline. And he wondered would he ever be as successful, when their views and his views were so diametrically opposed.

Most of these men, he realized with something of a shock, were older than himself. They owed nothing of their position to him, but to heredity. As far as he was concerned the single tie to bind them to him would be loyalty to the throne, and only too often in the past this had proved inadequate to restrain their lawless ambitions. The throne was insufficient by itself, came the devastating thought into his mind: a strong and resolute occupant is more important than any throne however ancient. Yet he could not be rid of them: King Stork must accept those that King Log had left in place.

* * *

*Domed memorials erected on the spot where the body is burned and having, as a rule, a small pillar in the centre on which are engraved female figures, one for each wife burnt at her husband's funeral.

In the last watch of the third night, just before it was light, the Rawul passed quietly out from life. A little earlier he had whispered: "The end comes. Put me on the floor". Rattan Singh and a priest had lifted him and placed him on the floor strewn with dry sand, that he might die, as every Hindu hopes to die, upon the bosom of Mother Earth.

So gentle and silent was his passing that Rattan Singh did not perceive it had come. But the priest, more used to the signs, noted it and touched Rattan Singh on the arm. "The *Bara-boora has left us," was all he said.

Rawul Rattan Singh saw the priest open his father's mouth, place in it a golden coin and then carefully bandage up the jaw. With one last look he turned and went out into the dark. It was Uncle Gorah who, waiting patiently in another room, took his arm and led him to Padmini.

* * *

Rawul Samar Singh's obsequies were accompanied by demonstrations of popular affection which surprised even those who had had opportunity to gauge his popularity. A continuous stream of people could be seen winding their way over every track which led to Chittorgarh. They arrived by ox-cart, by camel, on horseback or afoot.

*The 'Great-ancient' or 'Wise Elder' are expressions used here age and dignity are synonymous.

It was late in the afternoon before the final arrangements had been completed. Then to the roll of the great drums of the Tripolia gate and the wailing of the women collected behind the zenana walls, the funeral cortège started on its way to the Mahasati, the place of cremation, the spot hallowed by women's sacrifice to love.

Along the road leading to the Chaugan, down which he had so often passed in life, the body of the dead king, stretched on a silver couch, dressed as for high festival, was borne on the shoulders of retainers through wailing crowds. Immediately behind the bier, on foot, followed Rattan Singh, the nobles and the clansmen, their heads and faces shaven as a sign of mourning. Priests chanting dirges headed the procession.

Just past the point at which the road from the Eastern Gate of the Sun joins the Chaugan road, the cortège turned right, down a gentle gradient. Now it passed through the north-gate of the Mahasati, built by the late Rawul and inscribed with the genealogy of his house, and entered the walled space, sacred to the dead.

On a vacant plot, surrounded by the memorials to generations of illustrious ancestors, the bier was set down before a great pile of sandal wood. Soon the frail body was lifted up and placed upon the pyre, stripped of its finery and jewels. Thrice Rattan Singh and all the clansmen circled the pile; thrice were the

titles of the dead king proclaimed by the Lord of Rhymes. Then the pyre was lit.

As the fires died down the mourners left their places to be taken by priests, who would watch till dawn and then collect the ashes, later to be sprinkled on the holy river Ganges.

Fourteen days of uncleanness—days when the hush of mourning hung heavy over the whole land. During the first seven, custom forbade any man to shave. Then ceremonial cleansing and a feast in honour of the dead.

Oppressed by private sorrow, these days with all their social calls upon him were a testing time for Rattan Singh's endurance. When the last guest had left and the Brahmins had fixed an auspicious date for his coronation—a month ahead—he gave a sigh of relief. "Let's get away from it all for a bit," he said to Padmini, and she nodded in mute agreement.

* * *

Out among the hills where great Bapu Rawul had spent his early days, living in a little loopholed forest lodge, life for them began again to have a sweeter savour. It was a strange wild country, wearing an air of enchantment and inhabited by Bhils and other creatures of the forest. The day, chiefly to please Gorah and Badul who had accompanied them, they passed in hunting, when the Bhils drove game and later stayed to feast and dance the evening

through. Once Padmini said to Gorah: "I'm glad to see you're settling down to a warless life so well." He had looked at her and replied: "Rubbish, my child. You can put a crow in a cage, but he'll never learn to talk like a parrot,"—which was just his way of indicating that a leopard cannot change his spots.

But it was the nights which brought to Padmini the greatest happiness. Stretched by her man she lay awake drinking in the strange sounds that filled the air, or listening to the throb of the 'tablas' in some Bhil hut and the singing of their curious forest songs mingled with the reedy music of their pipes. These were things, she felt sure, she would remember long after more important ones had faded from her memory.

There was an old Bhil headman who delighted them with stories. The one that Padmini liked best told of how the Banas, the river par excellence of Mewar, came into being.

Many, many years ago there was a lovely and chaste shepherdess among the Bhils. One day she was bathing in a stream rose-naked. She looked up and was horrified to see a strange man watching her from the banks. She prayed to God to shield her from his gaze. Obediently the waters rose and covered her. She became changed into ripples on the surface of a great river, which henceforth was known as 'Banasi', the 'Hope of the Forest'. Even now at times a

little hand may be seen appearing above the surface of the waters.

Once Uncle Gorah had insisted on telling a story about these simple jungle people, who know nothing, do nothing, and are as dependent on the forests as the beasts themselves.

"When I went on a visit to Cambay on the shores of the Indian Ocean, I took a Bhil along with me for hunting on the way. Arrived at Cambay I took him down to the shore. He had never seen the sea before and with difficulty I could persuade him to come away. Some hours later he returned to gaze at it. The tide in the meantime had gone out. He stared open-mouthed at the bare-rocks and sand that before had been under water, and then remarked: "My goodness: they must have a lot of cattle here to drink all that water."

Padmini was convulsed with laughter. "He thought the cattle had drunk it! How perfectly delicious!"

The old Bhil headman looked puzzled. "Then who did drink it?" he asked simply.

Early morning of the day on which they were to leave found Rattan Singh and Padmini on the roof of the lodge. Leaning on the low wall they watched the dawn strike through the hills which shouldered each other as close as a herd of buffaloes. The trees and bushes still drooped with the dew and sleep of night. Birds

were just waking and the shrill notes of peacocks echoed through the ravines, as they prepared to descend from tree-tops to earth. Down below them, in the courtyard, elephants and horses were being saddled ready for the march.

On the freshness of the morn the cavalcade left this pleasant camp of happy memories and wound its way down the narrow mountain track, leading to the plains. Through the curtains of her palanquin, Padmini glimpsed fields far below, combed now of their harvest but dotted with little shucks of corn awaiting transportation to the threshing floors. Just below the road, where the jungle was scantier, flocks of sheep and goats dappled the hill-sides.

Then out on to the plains, sere and parched ; over mere tracks, along which moved slowly and swayingly occasional strings of camels padding softly through the tawny sands.

At midday they halted for a rest and food. A great banian tree provided shade, and swarthy, gaily dressed women from a village near by brought water in brass vessels balanced on their heads. A two hours halt and the march began again. A slight breeze had sprung up and across the sky a few clouds were moving and throwing shadows on the hills behind them.

When, topping a rise, they saw Chittorgarh before them, it was already stained by the yellow of late sunset and Talheti lay in a fume of grey smoke at its feet. The fortress in the fading

light seemed to grow out of the rock, a symbol of the Children of the Sun whose place of dwelling is among the clouds. The pace which just before had been slowing, now increased, but the first star was burning and the hill was settling into silence and dark before they reached the Ram Pol gate.

VI

WITHIN the fortress walls everyone was astir. It was the coronation day of Rawul Rattan Singh and his consort the Rani Padmini.

Early in the morning Rattan Singh had visited the temple of Ganesh, the godling who is to be invoked at the commencement of every important undertaking. In a shrine, musky with incense, he had listened to the High Priest's prayer:

"Oh, Ganesh! thou art the mighty lord, thy single tusk is beautiful, and demands the tribute of praise from the Indra of song. Thou art the Chief of the human race; destroyer of unclean spirits; the remover of fevers. Thy bard sounds thy praises; let to-day's great work be accomplished."

Thereafter, making his offering, he had left to hurry back for further preliminary ceremonies and purifications.

At midday, when the sun was at its zenith, the enthronement ceremony took place before a great concourse of the chiefs, clansmen and leading members of each community.

After prayers and oblations offered by Brahmins, the Rana of Oguna—lineal descendant of Baleo Bhil, who with Dewa had accompanied Bapu Rawul in all his wanderings, ruler of one thousand hamlets scattered over the forest-clad valleys and at whose call five thousand bowmen would muster—approached Rattan Singh. Taking him by the arm, he led him to the ‘gadi’, the huge royal cushion of Mewar. After doing obeisance to the throne of his ancestors, Rattan Singh took his seat upon it.

A pause whilst Padmini, with covered head, glides through curtains to take her place beside her husband.

Next the Oondree Chief, descendant of Dewa Bhil, comes forward bearing a salver of spices and sacred grains of rice. The Lord of Rhymes proclaims the royal titles; the Rana Lakshman Singh presents the sword of state; the Rana of Oguna makes the ‘teeka’ mark on the foreheads of the king and queen, and, to the rolling of drums and blare of trumpets, the ‘Changi’, chief emblem of regality, is raised over their heads. From every throat, and taken up by the crowds outside, bursts forth the cry of: ‘Rawul Rattan Singhji ki jai’—Victory to Rawul Rattan Singh.

The ceremony concludes with the paying of homage by the chiefs and clansmen and by the presentation of 'nazars' to the new Rawul.

An hour or two later, surrounded by his court, the question is asked him: "What is to be the first royal act after enthronement?" He pauses and then commands: "Release all captives of war held within the fortress."

* * *

That night, alone in his own apartment for custom forbade his visiting the queen upon this special night, Rattan Singh asked himself what was to be the shape and texture of his future life. He would have liked to have had Padmini with him to discuss it. What nonsense, he told himself, that the priests should be free to frame such rules: how complicated they liked to make everything, just to bolster up their hold on laymen!

He wrapped himself in a padded coat, for the night was cold, and went out on to the veranda. Sounds of revelling in his honour drifted up to him across the lake. There was something to be said for the Muslim belief that every berry of the grape contains a devil. A good many devils were being imbibed this night he knew, and was glad to have escaped the scene.

He sat on drinking in the liquid night. Somehow before to-morrow, when he would

have to attend the first council meeting, he must get a positive conception of the values for which he intended to stand. Well, thank goodness, the business of assuring a period of peace had been concluded. Had it been left for him to do at the outset of his reign, great disaffection amongst part of the Rajputs would certainly have arisen. Even now, he wondered, would they scheme to change this new policy, to re-establish the old? His father in the end had agreed fully with his ideas: Uncle Gorah's loyalty to him was unquestioned, however much he may have disagreed in his heart: but the rest.....? All those compliments they had paid him to-day.....were they genuine or just lies in court dress?—He felt isolated, lonely, and realized for the first time the truth that all elevations are cold.

Come what might, he must stick to his principles and not let himself be persuaded by his brother chiefs to be blind to what he felt were the duties of kingship. Impossible for him ever to believe, as apparently they did, that Rajputs had been born into the world 'ready booted and spurred to ride and millions ready saddled to be ridden'. It began to dawn upon him that it was at the doors of the Lord of Rhymes and his fellow bards that much of the blame for the Rajput outlook should be laid; for it was these people who systematically used tradition as an enormous magnifier. What would he not give to be able to tear away the

distortions covering, as moss covers a tree, the stories and expose the naked truth.

But he would have to move warily. These Children of the Sun were a turbulent crowd. Resolute champions of what they considered to be their privileges, however indefensible they might seem to others, they were certain to resist all efforts at reform. He recalled how at least one of his ancestors had paid with his life for holding views very much like his own, and how earlier attempts to curb the voracity of these clansmen had led to ugly outbreaks of treason and rebellion. Yes, certainly he must walk warily.

After a time he fell asleep where he sat wrapped in his coat. It was Jaysu who woke him at an early hour and persuaded him to go to his bed.

* * *

"Well, *Andataji," said Gorah one day some weeks later to the young Rawul. "How's the crown sitting—not too heavy on the brow, I trust?"

"Not so far, Uncle, largely due to your efforts for peace."

"What do you want to rake that up for? want to forget it. It was the worst day's work I ever did."

* 'Giver of bread'—a term often used to an Indian Ruler.

Rattan Singh smiled.

"The old Guru has been along to see me to-day," Gorah continued. "He says the omens point to a really bad famine this year."

"I hope his prophecy will prove as wrong as some of his others have," said Rattan Singh, though he looked serious. "We are ill-prepared for such a catastrophe."

But when by the end of August no rains had come and the clouds skurried away overhead leaving the ground parched, the fields dust-bowls, Rattan Singh recalled these words. He sent out agents far and wide to try to buy up stocks of grain, but they returned empty-handed or with little, for the fear of famine was widespread and none would sell.

He made a quick tour of the whole State to gauge for himself the exact situation. All the forts and garrisons had at least a year's reserve of food: that was a precaution always maintained against sudden attack and possible siege. But in the villages especially among the poorer classes, reserves were small or non-existent. Already all seed had been lost: sown to sprout and wilt almost immediately. There was no grass and everywhere cattle were beginning to die. On all sides there was the stench of death. Lakes were dried up or mere muddy pools; in the wells the water-level was dropping ominously.

"Take your cattle and trek south," he advised all. Some obeyed; others pleaded that already it was too late and the cattle unfit for a long journey.

A vague, all embracing pessimism possessed him. He felt powerless in the face of relentless nature and a feeling of oppression weighed upon him suffocatingly. He returned to Chittorgarh.

September came and the air grilled and bubbled with heat, forcing thirsty beasts of the field and the forest to the last puddles in the lakes. There, like the necklet of some foul demon, they died and lay, bloated and stinking in a circle round the pools.

Rattan Singh made one more tour. He had found no key to a store of plenty, but could not rest with so much misery around him and felt drawn, irresistibly, to go out among it. But the horrors of death and decay which met his eyes on all sides, the utter degradation that he saw, drove him back again. A vast stupefied mass, shrivelled as dry seaweed, were struggling to prolong a tortured existence.

In towns and villages, in fields and by the roadsides men, women and children lay dead in such numbers that the stench choked. For lack of grass the cattle, such as remained turned to men's flesh to ease their gnawing pains. Men, to whom flesh was forbidden and a thing of loathing, forgot all in their vain

struggle against death, and took to devouring the carcasses of dead beasts.

As the year advanced and the famine increased, the people left their homes, impelled to wander and still wander in hopes of finding something to assuage their suffering. Nothing else mattered to them. Eyes sunk deep in their heads, lips pale and covered by dried tendrils of slime, skin hard and shrivelled, bones showing through and the belly a mere pouch hanging empty, knuckles and knee-caps showing prominently—further and further they wandered, fighting for some stinking morsel or, when strength failed, lying down to cry and howl till merciful death released them. Men deserted their wives and children; women sold themselves as slaves; mothers sold their children; children deserted by their parents sold themselves. Some families took poison and so died together; others threw themselves down wells or over precipices. Men and women, still alive, were cut up by the stronger and their entrails eaten raw. A traveller was in danger of being murdered for his flesh.

The ghastly months followed each other in succession, and often Rattan Singh wondered could any of his people survive. The 'Loo' blew up fiercely and remorselessly, searching out, or so it seemed to him, the remains of a once great multitude to scorch and choke their last flickering breath.

forced to sail past life without being given sufficient chance to stop and fondle it.

He heard a slight movement behind him and looked round. The light was spilling out from Padmini's door. She stood there, lovely as dawn itself, her arms raised and holding the edges of the parted curtains, her straight, glorious young body silhouetted through the flimsy folds of her night-dress. He went over and took her in his arms.

"Not been sleeping, darling?" he asked tenderly.

"Yes, a little, I think, but I wanted to keep awake till you came."

"I'd hoped you were fast asleep; actually I was sitting here because I didn't like the idea of disturbing you."

"Silly: why there's always lots of time to sleep when you're away and it helps to shorten the time till you return. When you are here, I never want to lose a minute of consciousness."

"Poor little sweetheart. It must be terribly dull for you at times."

"Yes, perhaps. But now, seeing we are together and time is precious, let's sit out here for a little, shall we?"

He led her to the seat and drew her on to his lap.

"That better?" he asked, laying her head on his shoulder.

CHILDREN OF THE SUN

"That I will not do," said the Ra stubbornly. "I can still raise money by mortgaging the State jewels."

Gorah shrugged his shoulders.

Book Two: Green Banner

I

KHAN 'ALA-UD-DIN KILJI, nephew of Feroze Shah Sultan of Delhi, and Governor of the province of Kara in the name of his uncle, sat deep in thought. It had been a bad day, a black day; the whole staff had been made to feel that, and none more than the Deputy Governor, Malik 'Ala-ul-mulk, who was now closeted with his chief.

"Malikji," said the Governor, sitting up suddenly and breaking the silence.

"Excellency," replied the Deputy, nervously rubbing his hands and expecting a fresh outburst of ill-humour.

"Malikji," repeated the "Governor, you are not without the gift of imagination, I believe."

"I trust not, Excellency."

"Well, an opportunity to use your gift has arisen." He paused awhile as if to let his words sink in, then continued: "I propose to be absent from my charge for a few months. During that period it will be your duty to forward to my august uncle, the Sultan, such bulletins of news as will allay any anxiety or suspicion concerning my movements."

"I hope Your Excellency's proposed absence is not due to any malady or indisposition?"

"No: despite anything you and the others may have thought to the contrary to-day, I'm perfectly well. I'm just bored."

"A great evil, no doubt," agreed the Deputy. "But how do you propose to cure it?"

"By a short holiday to the realms of King Ramchandra of Berar, who, unless rumour lies, possesses an attractive capital filled to bursting with good things."

At first the Deputy seemed unable to understand. He blinked. But when the full meaning of these words and their implications dawned upon him, he gave a slight gasp. Moreover, the reckless, almost mad look he noted in 'Ala-ud-din's eyes startled him out of his composure.

The Governor smiled. "My plans seem to urprise you somewhat," he said casually.

"Forgive me, Excellency, but do you realize that Berar is many weeks' march from here?"

"Did I not mention that I should be absent some months?"

"You did. But.....er.....this Raja? Report has it that he maintains a large and efficient army. What.....er.....what have you to put up against it?"

"A few thousand horses, my friend, and a nature that delights to play for high stakes."

The Deputy had nothing to say for some moments; he seemed to be measuring the odds. Then: "I've known you, boy and man, long enough to realize that you like to regard the world as wine to be poured into your tumbler, and I've got to admit that so far you have been remarkably successful." He paused again and looked nervously at his chief before continuing. "But this latest idea of yours.....well, to me it seems crazy."

"No doubt it would.....to *you*," the Governor replied pointedly. "But you have no concern with risks if any there be. All I require of you is to look after those bulletins. Are you agreeable?"

"I might try, but it will be difficult to quiet His Majesty's suspicions for so long a period, I fear."

"His Majesty places the greatest trust in me, as you know. I do not think it should be difficult to put him off the scent."

"In the case of His Majesty it may not be difficult, but, if I may be excused saying so, those around him are not so simple minded."

The Governor appeared to consider these last words. He knit his forehead and stroked the ends of his moustache. Then, in a manner which seemed rather to be expressing his own

thoughts than to be commenting on what had gone before, he said, almost brutally: "Simple mindedness—pah! that is unforgivable in a king." He stopped abruptly.

"Perhaps so," agreed the Deputy, and added immediately afterwards with a boldness unusual in him: "But, simple minded or not, you owe a deep debt of gratitude to His Majesty, for all the favours he has shown you."

"I prefer to think I earned those favours," he said darkly. Then changing his tone: "But we're getting away from the subject. The only question is, will you do as I ask?"

The Deputy agreed finally but without any show of enthusiasm. He had passed through a good many difficult years and had grown cautious and sceptical. He was inclined to think that one generally regretted more the things one did than those one left undone. With tincreasing age and a body grown corpulent, he was all for the middle-way and keeping out of avoidable trouble.

Later when he came to think things over, it was not so much his promise about the bulletins which worried him as the Governor's references to the well-known failings of the Sultan. He felt that, in this outburst, 'Ala-ud-din had momentarily drawn aside a veil to reveal something of the inner workings of his mind. And he was troubled.

II

LOOKING back on those days, 'Ala-ul-mulk, now Provost of Delhi City but grown corpulent to a point where movement had become distasteful, perceived that the events of the last two years had been moving so fast as to have been kaleidoscopic in effect, blurring memory of almost every single event. Certainly the present moment was calm, most gratifyingly so, but he suspected that this was only because the present was sliding down into a future of action, possibly of danger; a sort of lull before storm. It was opportune, he decided, to try and recapture those events, sort them out and get them into clear perspective: learn possibly their hidden lessons.

He had lunched well and was resting in a room filled with a pleasant subdued light. His servants had gone off for their noon siesta, and he could look forward to several hours of undisturbed meditation. Silent hours like these were a gift from the gods, a gift he too often misused by dropping off to sleep. To-day he would put them to better use.

What an amazing if unromantic adventurer was this Sultan 'Ala-ud-din! In all history perhaps there had been no more daring and impudent an exploit than his sack of Raja Ramchandra's Capital. And what booty! He, 'Ala-ul-mulk, had checked it into the treasury on 'Ala-ud-din's return to Kara. He tried to

recall some of its details— 18,000 lbs. of 30,000 lbs. of silver, bushels of pearls gems and over a thousand bales of silks rich fabrics. He paused to dwell with satisfaction for a few moments upon his own share of the loot. 'Ala-ud-din had been generous to him at least; the ruby ring now resting on his third finger alone was worth a small fortune to a man in his position, though it was not alone for its intrinsic worth that he valued it; he loved to gaze into its depths where aeons of mystery and passion seemed to slumber.

Of course 'Ala-ud-din had been lucky, amazingly lucky. His arrival before the Rajah's capital had coincided with the absence of most of the Berar army, away escorting the Rani and her son on pilgrimage; only a few thousand troops remained to oppose him. And his luck had held for, when the main army did return suddenly, just as he was leaving, he had by a ruse, defeated that also. Actually the credit for this second victory belonged to Zafar Khan, who, detailed with a small force for another operation, had arrived at a critical moment for 'Ala-ud-din and saved what was on the point of turning into a nasty disaster.

Zafar Khan, he suddenly recalled, was dead now. Among all the welter of blood that had followed the Berar exploit, it was hard to keep track of who was alive, who dead or who blinded or imprisoned. But Zafar Khan's death had caused a good deal of talk at the

time, he now remembered. A fearless cavalry leader and firm supporter of the new regime, he had lost his life in a fairly recent fight against invading Mongols. Reckless as ever he had charged the enemy's left and driven it before him. In the end he was surrounded, left unsupported and slain refusing to surrender. Apparently 'Ala-ud-din had watched the action, and, though he had ample troops, had made no attempt to rescue him. It was curious, curious.....Or was it simply that to outdare the Sultan was to incur his jealousy? That last victory, as to earlier ones, had been directly due to Zafar Khan's leadership. Perhaps there was a lesson to be learnt from his fate!

'Ala-ud-din's accession to power had been like the rising of a blood-red full moon, presaging misfortune for many. It was true that things under the late Sultan Feroz Khan had been going from bad to worse. His mildness, which had become proverbial, had led to a great relaxation in discipline throughout his vast realms. Yet, the act of treachery and ingratitude by which his nephew had overthrown and murdered him stuck in the gorge. No one could accuse him, 'Ala-ul-mulk, of being squeamish; the stench of starkest reality failed usually to do more than slightly nauseate him. But this act of barbarism towards a kindly old man, who doted upon him and to whom he owed everything, was so outrageous, so grossly wanton that every other crime

'Ala-ud-din had committed piled into insignificance beside it. And to cap it all he had caused the head of his uncle and benefactor to be paraded through the country, stuck on a spear!

His other crimes had been legion. After seizing the throne, he had ordered the eyes of all possible claimants to the throne to be cut out. Sadistically he had watched the carrying out of the sentence and had made all his officers watch too. Then there had been that ghastly massacre of the innocents—wives and children of the troops who had mutinied over the distribution of Mongol loot. The mutineers had made good their escape, so 'Ala-ud-din had visited their sins upon their families. 'Ala-ul-mulk could picture the horrid scene now. Mothers forced to look on while their children were tossed from spear to spear. Then they themselves—thrown to wild beasts to be torn or trodden to death by elephants. And a few, those of better class, delivered to the embraces of the scavengers of Delhi—a degradation than which there is no greater in oriental eyes. For all rebuilding, of course, the site must be cleared: but why make a Roman holiday of it? Surely the important thing was the clearing.

'Ala-ul-mulk halted the cavalcade of recollection. He mopped his forehead. Thinking of importance, who, he asked himself, could judge it? Was anything important except to get the best out of life, to make as few mistakes as possible in the ordering of one's

"To drive off the Mongols," he had replied shortly.

"But, Your Majesty, what chance of success have you against such a multitude?"

"What would you have me do?"

"Temporize, buy them off, offer them a northern province: anything but risk defeat."

"In fact sit on my eggs like some old hen," the Sultan had snorted; then had added contemptuously: "See here, once before you presumed to give me advice and I luckily did not take it. And I'm not taking it on this occasion either. What do you know of war, you scribe and son of a scribe? Clear out and get on with your job."

Trembling at this outburst 'Ala-ul-mulk was wobbling off, when he had been called back to hear; "And mind you do it well, or you may live to regret this day."

Once again the advice had proved wrong, but largely on this occasion due to the gallantry of Zarfaz Khan. Still the moral was clear: in future refrain from giving advice to so unpredictable a person as Sultan 'Ala-ud-din: best remain stone silent.....

His thoughts ran on.

Of all those who had taken a leading part in helping 'Ala-ud-din to the throne, he 'Ala-ul-mulk and Ulugh Khan, the Sultan's

younger brother, alone remained. The nobles who had been bought over by Berar loot had disappeared one by one, their families reduced to poverty, their estates sequestered. Well, perhaps this was not strange. A man who can prove traitor to one Sultan, may be equally disloyal to another. Doubtless they deserved their fate, but none so greatly as he who decided it. Two of them had been in 'Ala-ud-din's inmost confidence. 'Ala-ul-mulk recalled, with a slight shudder, one of the Sultan's remarks—made apparently in light mood but just before the disappearance of these two persons. He had said: "Three may keep a secret if two are dead."

'Ala-ud-din's ways were always deep and dark, and he, 'Ala-ul-mulk, had never really been able to follow the workings of his mind. Best, now that he was getting old, to be satisfied with what he had; sit back and enjoy leisurely the nuts and wine course of life. Why court trouble or rack one's brains to try and understand a game which seemed to have no regular rules and where the next move could never be predicted by one who retained any vestiges of honour and decency? Better a sparrow in the hand than a peacock in expectation: the finest armour is to keep out of gunshot range.

closed his eyes. Peace caressed him with a kind smooth hand. He fell asleep.

III

KAFUR, the chief eunuch of the Sultan seraglio, was not finding life too easy. True he stood high in royal favour, but he wondered how long this could last.

"The trouble with my master," he was telling a friend, "is that he's beginning to suffer from sexual indigestion. Instead of sipping, as a rare wine, the delights of his women, he gulps them down and so never tastes their real fragrance. I've combed the whole kingdom for youth and beauty, spent weeks in training them in the arts of passion, but he never gives them a chance to display their talents. One and all tell me that he just throws them on the bed and spends himself like some common soldier might with a woman found during the sack of a town."

"Why not try to train the Sultan in the gentle art of love?" suggested the friend.

"I have; and the invariable reply is that when I bring him some woman of superlative beauty and attractions, he'll enjoy her with the leisureliness which perfection demands."

"Can't you find such a woman?"

"Am I a miracle-worker that I can steal a black-eyed nymph from paradise?"

His friend left and Kafur remained steeped in thought. Somewhere, he told himself, such a *hourî* must exist in India. He would double the number of his agents, redouble the reward for anyone who could tell him where such a peerless creature was to be found. In the meantime he would go and have a talk with fat old 'Ala-ul-mulk.

The Provost of Delhi received the eunuch, but he was none too pleased to see him. From the first he had disliked this capable but vile and bumptious slave. It was he who had nicknamed him, aptly but inadequately, 'Hazardinari'—the thousand dollar slave—from the price for which he had originally been bought. Still policy demanded that he should not disclose his real contempt and dislike of the fellow. He was far too powerful to make an enemy of. Now-a-days the Sultan limited his close association to four persons only, Ulagh Khan his brother, 'Ala-ul-mulk, a general Nasrat Khan and this eunuch Kafur.

The guest sat himself down without waiting to be asked.

"How's the belly to-day, Provost Saheb?" he inquired with a grin.

"As well as can be expected, thank you. And how are the testicles?"

The shot reached its mark and put an end to any further pleasantries Kafur might be

intending. He was very sensitive about his physical condition.

The opening moves over and a truce called, hookahs were sent for. Soon there was the soothing sound of rhythmical bubbling and popped smoke began to curl upwards.

"I wish to God," sighed Kafur, "that something would turn up to keep the Sultan busy. My department can't stand the strain much longer of being his only source of distraction."

"If you want more wars and more victories," replied the Provost, "the cure may well be worse than the disease."

"Why?"

"Well, his successes already seem to be turning his brain."

"What are the symptoms?"

"I hear that the other night he was imagining an analogy between himself with we four and the Prophet Muhammad and his four companions, and was dreaming of spiritual as well as material conquests. In the latter he sought to surpass Alexander of Macedon and in the former Muhammad."

"What harm is there in his dreaming?"

"Only this, that he apparently proposes to declare himself a prophet."

"That might be dangerous and antagonize everyone serving under the Green Banner of Islam."

"Exactly -- but who's going to tell him so?"

"It's up to you as his oldest friend."

The Provost blanched, but said nothing. He was thinking of his recent resolution to keep out of trouble at all costs. "Damned if I'm going to," he told himself under his breath.

"Well now," continued the eunuch, complacently rubbing his nose, "you've got your problem as I have mine."

"What's yours?"

"To find a superlatively lovely woman, one that will outshine any other in the harem, and....." he paused before adding almost desperately: "God knows they are lovely as black pearls."

"Pah:" said the Provost, with the conviction of one who had in his day been a connoisseur of women: "Perfect beauty is no good in bed."

"Exactly what I've told the Sultan. But he won't believe it."

* * *

A few days later the Sultan sent for ul-mulk. He had drunk a little beyond me and his eyelids looked heavy. He dem that his old friend should give an opinion

two projects, to show reason why 'Ala-ud-din the Unconquerable should not surpass both Muhammad and Alexander in prowess.

'Ala-ul-mulk pretended that the question had taken him completely by surprise, and begged for time to consider his answer. This was granted.

Back in the seclusion of his own home, he lowered himself to his couch and began to think furiously. After a time he smiled. "Yes, of course, that's it," he muttered. "I might have said it straight away." He paused a moment to lick his lips. Then, as if rehearsing a speech, he said aloud: "Sire, twice I have ventured to proffer advice: twice circumstances have proved that advice was wrong. In the present weighty matter, I can only suggest that you follow your own judgment." He said the words over to himself again, then concluded: "Quite safe and even smacking a little of flattery."

Then something happened.....A small voice out of the past was speaking.

"My son," the voice seemed to be saying, and he thought he recognized it to be that of his mother long dead. "My son, you wear your sins with a fine cloak. But the day is not far distant when they shall be uncloaked before Allah by Muhammad his prophet, blessed be his name. And upon that day what shall it profit you that, even if you did not take a share in blaspheming the holy one, at least you did

nothing to prevent another blaspheming in your hearing. Remember that he who claps his hands for a fool to dance is no better than the fool."

The voice trailed away. 'Ala-ul mulk jerked his massive body to alertness as if trying to catch the last fading strains. He remained motionless for a time, then sank back. His forehead was wet, his breathing laboured.

He lay on, his brain unable to frame a thought. Gradually far off memories, faint but fair, began to envelop him, like a golden haze they drifted through his mind. A picture of his mother rose up before him. For years her memory had been buried under layers of oblivion, but now he saw her with a clearness that time had not been able to efface, sitting in a cool garden, her children around her. As so often was her way, she was telling them stories from the Koran.

But now he was being given another chance—one that might provide atonement for the past.....With an effort he sat bolt upright. He knew now that, for all his oft boasted indifference to his childhood's faith, he was still a child hungering for God. Well a chance had come—not perhaps of finding God, but at least of witnessing for Him. He mustn't let this chance go, cost what it may. He would, on this occasion at least, throw caution to the winds; forget the subsequent pains it might cause him.

He saw his duty clear as spring water. In the world of storm and stress one thing, the Muslim faith, remained a great tree erect and motionless. He would take his stand beneath its shadow, place his back against its massive trunk, defend it with his life, if needs be.

The emotional strain had been too great; his head drooped, his eyes closed; soon he fell asleep like a child worn-out by sobbing.....

When again he woke dawn, red and steaming was already come. He raised himself, rubbing his eyes. At first he thought he had been dreaming, but his court head dress, still lying where he had cast it the evening before on his return from the palace, was a touch of realism which dispelled such possibilities. In the light of dawn his resolution paled.

He called his servants, ordered a bath and food. An hour later he dismissed them again

is sweet.....or else there can be no merit in sacrificing it."

In a mood calm, almost beatific, he put his affairs in order. Then he sat down to await the coming of evening.

IV

WHEN 'Ala-ul-mulk entered the hall of private audience, the Sultan was already there surrounded by his court. Seated closest him were the other three 'companions'. He bowed to the throne and joined the little group. Wine was circulating freely.

He was hardly seated before the Sultan beckoned to him to approach.

"Your answer is ready, Malikji?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Then proceed."

'Ala-ul-mulk gave a quick glance at those around him. To no single one of them, he felt, could he look for support. A sense of loneliness descended upon him. He shivered as with a sudden chill.

"Your Majesty," he began, "first I would ask a favour. The matter is hardly one for public discussion. Please dismiss all but those who enjoy your fullest confidence."

The Sultan gave him a searching look; a momentary smile, cruel almost intolerable,

passed across the corners of his mouth. "So be it," he said at length.

"And now the wine."

"Why?"

"A mind uninflamed is necessary to consider matters such as these."

The Sultan beckoned to a servant to remove the tray.

"And now, Malikji," said he, "proceed."

'Ala-ul-mulk raised his arms and crossed them over his chest. As he did so the ruby on his finger blazed blood-red. Hastily he looked away, only to see over the Sultan's shoulder, or so it seemed, Death grinning at the prospect of a harvest. He cleared his throat.

"Your Majesty, I have given deep thought to the proposal that Sultan 'Ala-ud-din should stand forth as a leader of religion." He paused, striving to delay even for a few seconds the fateful moment.

he will not long be able to deceive himself, much less the world."

Well, the words were spoken: now for the consequences. He did not dare lift his eyes to look at the Sultan. Dumbly he awaited his fate.

One minute; another minute passed. He could hear his own quick breathing: nothing else. Then he ventured to look up.

The Sultan's chin rested on his chest, his hands were crossed tightly on his lap. Deep in thought, he seemed to be fighting some terrible inward battle. Time, like the flurry of monsoon rain, pressed on. For 'Ala-ul-mulk the suspense became almost unendurable. If only the Sultan would put an end to it!

Then 'Ala-ud-din raised his head. His expression, usually so confident, was as of a man come suddenly from darkness into a blinding glare—groping, uncertain. His eyes met those of the Malik, but no words passed his lips.

Little by little his features changed; a softness took the place of uncertainty. Never before had those near him seen him look so calm, so human. Finally he spoke.

"Malikji," came his voice, low and without the slightest trace of anger or hostility. "I gratefully acknowledge the justness of your

rebuke. You have saved me from a great impiety."

He got up from his couch and embraced the Malik. "Such fearless honesty from a minister is a pearl beyond price," he said and led him to the couch.

'Ala-ul-mulk could hardly believe his ears. His head spun; he felt weak and tired; the effort had been greater than he knew.

"Take some wine," invited the Sultan, sensing his old friend's plight and pressing a goblet to his lips.

The warm wine revived him; he felt his blood begin to course again. But still he could scarcely credit his hearing.

"I thought my boldness would have been punished by death," he stammered in the king's ear.

"I realized that," smiled the Sultan. "But come now, your answer to my second question. Why should I not emulate Alexander, go forth and conquer the world?"

For a time the Malik did not reply. "Caution! Caution!" he told himself. He drained another goblet of wine, felt stronger, waxed bolder. A delicious feeling of recklessness began to possess him. Caution was forgotten.

"Inspired by your kindness," he said at length, "I am tempted to suggest in the first place that Your Majesty should temper enjoyment with prudence, lest there should be written in your heart that dread word—satiety."

"And in the second place?"

"Remember that success can be a deadly thing; can fog the soul as strong wine blinds the eyes."

The Sultan smiled indulgently. "Malikji," he whispered, but not unkindly, "it is you who should be proclaimed a prophet, not me." He clapped his hands and a servant entered. "Bring a robe-of-honour and a necklace of rubies," he ordered.

Then turning to 'Ala-ul-mulk, he said: "I know not whether to admire most your wisdom or your boldness, but, in any case, for your words to-night, I thank you. Go in peace."

* * *

When his servants entered his room next morning, they found 'Ala-ul-mulk stretched on his couch, still wearing the robe-of-honour and

the chain of rubies. He was dead. The nervous strain of the day before had been too great for a heart already over-taxed.

V

RANTHAMBHOR, mighty stronghold of the Rajput Chief of Dhundhar, was again in the news. It had defied Balban's arms and daunted Feroz Shah. But one, who had just minted coins bearing the proud title of 'Alexander the Second', was not to be deterred by its vaunted strength. Moreover, its ruler, Raja Hamir Deo, had recently harboured certain rebellious Muslims. Sultan Ala-ud-din decided to capture it. Despite the late Malik's advice, he was determined to pass through the world like a thunderstorm: Hamir Deo should be the first to be stricken by his lightning.

A great army was ready assembled in Delhi—Tartar cavalry in bright tunics and steel breast-plates, slant-eyed and long moustached, bristling with swords, spears and daggers; elephants sheathed in chain-armour and carrying fighting-howdahs filled with picked troops; spearmen, bowmen, highly-trained crews for stone throwing 'balistae,' and a vast heterogeneous mass of commissariat, camp-followers and vivandières: the whole under the command of Ulagh Khan assisted by Nasrat Khan.

On the night before the expedition was to commence, 'Ala-ud-din entertained his high

officers at an open-air banquet on the banks of the river Jumna. The occasion was a special one and Delhi had never seen such lavish entertainment. A canvas city had sprung up miraculously around a grassy plain sloping down to the water. Great banks of jasmine and oleanders, soft carpets and softer lights; rich food and wines that sparkled like molten gems. Across the waters drifted liquid notes of lutes, played by an orchestra on a boat moored in mid-stream, the music mingling with the heady perfume of the flowers.

Presently, at a landing-stage built out into the stream, arrived with the gentle swish of oar, high-pooped barge after barge, each bearing a troupe of dancing-girls. They poured out to fill the arena before the Sultan's couch. Then singing and dancing that got wilder, more sensuous, more erratic as wine enflamed the dancers or Kafur the eunuch, charged with the arrangements, spurred them on to greater and ever greater lasciviousness. He was here, there, everywhere, moving with a step noiseless as a cat and grinning delightedly at every fresh proof of the guests' appreciation.

'Ala-ud-din drank deeply; his eyes glowed fantastically. As the night wore on, his character of the second Alexander waxed and spanned itself over the whole gathering. Songs in his praise grew more and more fulsome in their flattery; dancers threw themselves deliriously at his feet to kiss them; courtiers bowed lower to him

with a deference that suggested his divinity; all hung upon his words. This was only the first of many such nights of feasting, he told them thickly, each marking the beginning of some new whirlwind campaign designed to sweep away some mighty throne. Nothing could stop him, neither mountains nor oceans. Ulagh Khan should tear this infamous Raja of Ranthambhor from his citadel, hang him high and level his castle to the ground. He bade his brother and Nasrat Khan pick out half-a-dozen of the most beautiful of the dancing girls to accompany them in the campaign. Conquest, the juice of the grape and soft clinging bodies—these were the gods' best gifts to man, he declared. He distributed rich gifts to the performers; ordered the immediate execution of a slave who had spilt wine over his couch. Just before dawn he was borne to his tent, carried on the shoulders of his fawning courtiers, amid wild cheering.

* * *

Along the ancient highway leading from Delhi to Ajmer the army plodded its dusty way. The miles grew heavy on their feet. Sand clouds, blotting out the landscape, covered the troops in a blanket of grey, filling their eyes and ears, irritating their noses. All around them the land, parched, bare and cruel, grilled in the moist heat preceding the rainy-season, which 'Ala-ud-din had calculated would break in time to provide supplies of water in the arid country surrounding Ranthambhor.

In the broken country amid the Alwar hills temporary relief was afforded by a violent thunderstorm. It commenced with a snarling wind, which raised great billows of dust like rollers breaking on the shore. Then with a roar of thunder and the blinding flare of lightning the firmament seemed to drop down to smother all in an enveloping curtain of rain. But it soon passed, to be replaced by an atmosphere, steamy and muggy yet mercifully washed clean of dust.

Onwards, ever onwards past deserted villages, whose inhabitants had fled in terror at the news of their approach; past many a hill-top fortress, whose garrisons looked down apprehensive and inquisitive; over dried river-beds, dried tanks, till nearly two weeks later the head of the column bent left through the State of Dhundhar, the modern Jaipur, and took the road that leads to the pass and guardian fortress of Ranthambhor.

"My God, what a country!" said Ulugh Khan to his second-in-command.

"The land of bad dreams, one might call it," agreed Nasrat Khan and quoted this well-known Hindi couplet concerning it:

Carrots for fruit, rank weeds for grass,
And men exposed behind;
Woman with pendant stomachs, too!
We've reached Dhundhar, I find.

Ulagh Khan laughed. "I seem to remember another one; it goes something like this," and, stumbling a little in an unaccustomed tongue, he recited:—

Bajra cakes in lieu of bread,
No split-peas but Moth instead;
Huts of leaves and thorns for fence.
Is this your fine Dhundhar, O Prince?

A few days later they entered a storm-torn waste of foot-hills leading up to the main ridge. Over it and along its crest, seemingly for miles on end, were the battlements and towers of Ranthambhor, famous in a hundred ballads. Up the bare hill-sides, straight as knives, ran the outer defences, studded here and there with bastions and watch-towers.

As they got nearer almost under the fortress, Ulagh Khan looked up at the sheerness of rocks, studied with a soldier's eye the escarpments and rugged casements through which fleecy clouds peeped from the high horizon, and remarked: "Our little Alexander the Second has set us a difficult task, methinks."

"A well-nigh impossible one," suggested Nasrat Khan gloomily.

That night the army encamped on the plains below, under cover of a chain of outposts.

The next two days were devoted to a thorough examination of the possibilities for assault. In the end Ulagh Khan, discussing

the situation which his second in command said: "If we've got to reduce this place by starvation, it may take six months or longer and we ourselves may have difficulties of supply."

"I agree: it seems that some attempt at direct assault will have to be made."

Finally it was decided that Nasrat Khan with picked troops should try to breach the defences at a point where a short level spur led up to a gate. "But there's hardly room to swing a cat there," he complained.

That same night, under cover of darkness men toiled to drag a heavy battering ram up steep slopes to position in front of the gate. Day break found them heavy-eyed but ready to commence the assault. A cold blue light grew over the hill-side and the plain below. Forms that had been grey and indistinct now donned the garb of natural colour and shape. Then suddenly, without the slightest preamble, a shower of heavy rocks descended upon them, hurled from balistae inside the walls. One rock struck Nasrat Khan dead instantly. Almost at the same moment the gate opened and Rajput warriors like unhooded falcons poured out sword in hand. A few minutes later all that was left of two hundred picked Muslim troops were a few lucky fugitives, who could be seen ~~ushing down the hill-side:~~ the rest lay dead ~~bove or mangled at the bottom of the cliff.~~

The attempt at direct assault had failed dismally.

There was no other course left but to reduce the fortress by starvation. Ulagh Khan decided and sent off a message to this effect to the Sultan.

VI

ON receipt of his brother's message 'Ala-ud-din lost no time in setting out from Delhi to his aid. The march was arduous and at Tilpat he decided to rest his troops and enjoy his favourite recreation, the chase.

After a long day's sport he and his small escort were benighted at a distance from the camp. He decided to bivouac and await new day. But in the camp his absence was causing some anxiety, and next morning Akat Khan, his nephew, with a hundred men of his own retinue, went in search of him. They found the Sultan, with one or two attendants only, sitting on a stool awaiting game that was being driven up to him.

Akat Khan was on the point of shouting out to him when suddenly his tongue seemed to go dry, his heart to beat with a strange flurry. He pulled in his horse and for a few seconds sat watching his uncle in his unaccustomed solitude. Unexpectedly an idea sprang full-formed into his mind. Why not kill the Sultan and seize the throne even as he himself had done! The

thought amazed but delighted him and, without further hesitation, he ordered his archers to draw their bows.

The Sultan defended himself bravely, using the stool as a shield. His faithful slave, Manik, stood before him and intercepted the arrows. But one found its way into the Sultan's shoulder and he fell to the ground. At once the cry arose: "The Sultan's dead." Akat Khan turned and galloped back to the camp.

Arrived there he held a hurried and informal court at which he announced the Sultan's death and proclaimed himself King in his stead. A few officers rashly came forward and offered him their congratulations. But when he attempted to enter the royal harem, the more cautious guards refused admission until he should produce his uncle's head.

Meanwhile stray horsemen to the number of sixty or seventy had gathered round 'Ala-ud-din, and dressed his wound. On his way back to the camp he was joined by other small bodies of horse which brought his number up to five or six hundred.

Nearing the camp he ascended a small knoll and caused the royal umbrella to be raised over his head. At this sight panic broke out among those who had joined Akat Khan. They, who just before had been so vociferous, now tried to scurry off like frightened mice. But it was too late. Akat Khan was seized

and immediately beheaded. The others were bound in chains.

The tedium of 'Ala-ud-din's convalescence was relieved by the punishment of these prisoners, who were put to death, a few each day, by slow hideous tortures. When he was sufficiently recovered, he marched on to Rant-hambhor.

The siege there under Ulagh Khan was still dragging on. The rains had broken providing ample water for the troops, but bringing with them fever and dysentery. The men were dispirited and bored. 'Ala-ud-din's first necessity was to infuse a new spirit into them. This he did by raiding neighbouring towns and villages, and handing over to the troops fat bunnias to loot and women to rape.

Each day as he sat before his tent gazing up at the stubborn fortress above him, his mind sought in vain some way to hasten its fall. Too much waiting was becoming a pain and he yearned to be able to conclude the siege and hurry on to pastures new. But he saw no way. He began to hate the line of battlements and turrets standing out in murky monochrome against the blue of heaven. Yet when he dropped his eyes from the hills, he hated even more the serrated belly of the wilderness around with its stubby camel-thorn and prickly cactus. Curse Hamir Deo for his obstinacy! Curse this God-forsaken country!

It was during these days of watchful idleness that two more of his nephews were brought to him as prisoners. They had attempted to raise the standard of revolt in Oudh, but had been overpowered and captured by loyal fief-holders. 'Ala-ud-din cast one look at them and straightaway ordered their eyes to be cut out. Then he drove them from his camp into the deserts beyond, with only an old bawd to guide and serve them. "This bird-witted younger generation," he told his court grimly, "must learn that 'Ala-ud-din and Feroz Shah are very different types of Sultan to deal with."

But hardly had this rebellion been suppressed when a serious revolt in the capital city of Delhi was reported. The news came to him one night when he was sitting at his wine. He was tired and had not slept well for nights. Roundly he cursed Tarmadi, the new provost of Delhi, for his bungling and his negligence. Ulugh Khan must go and put the revolt down, he decided, and sent for his brother. "Teach them a lesson they will take long to forget," he told him. "And make the deaths of all traitors protracted and public."

Somehow the news leaked out to the army and caused mutterings. Many of the rebels had relations in its ranks; others saw in the news a chance to get away from this detested spot, back to Delhi to aid in quelling the revolt. Were they to stay here for ever, grilling in the

sun, rotting in the rain, eating weevil-rations and fondling the same old half-dead women every night, they roared. They were sick to death of the whole business—that was what they were! If the Sultan was prepared to spend the rest of his life in this hell-hole, let him; they were not!

But 'Ala-ud-din was adamant in his resolve. Once more he used the lures of loot and lust to still their murmurings. Then light began to dawn on the dismal prospect. Ranmal, minister of the besieged Raja and a number of Hindus deserted the fortress and came over to him.

They were brought before him.

"What is the condition of supplies within the walls?" he asked them.

"Food may last sometime, but water is running low," they told him.

"Right. Now before your desertion is discovered, send two of your men back to poison the remaining water supplies." He glared at them, then added: "And if these men fail, you, the rest, shall suffer the thousand deaths. Go."

He sat back on his couch and smiled with satisfaction. "One only has to wait long enough for fruit to ripen," he muttered. "It's the same old story—someone always willing to play traitor!"

A few days later the fortress surrendered. Raja Hamir Deo came out and gave himself up together with the Muslims he had sheltered. They as well as Rammal were at once put to death. It was characteristic of 'Ala-ud-din to avail himself of the services of traitors and then to punish them for the treason by which he had profited.

Then word flew through the camp: "Enter for the slaughter! Into the fortress and into the women!" The troops yelled, unsheathed their swords and poured through the gates, still yelling.

Kafur, the eunuch, entered with the leading party. He went straight to the royal zenana. His duty was to skim the cream for his master's delectation. He arrived just in time to prevent them from committing suttee. Dragging forward two queens, he passed his hands over their bodies as a dealer might in appraising horseflesh. "Over-suckled and flabby of belly," was the verdict. "Let's look at the maids." But none passed his expert examination, save one young girl. "May shape well in a couple of years," he announced. "Put her aside. Anyone can have the rest." As the sobbing girl was led away she threw him an appealing look like a puppy that turns over on its back and micturates.

He went up to the flat roof above and looked down on the scene around. Everywher

was dust: the agonized squeals of the dying and the hoarse roar of the Muslims was like braying in his ears. Men kept hurtling in and out of houses, stuffing away loot into their shirts, dragging screaming women by the arm. In one little square stood a body of Hindu merchants aspen and stupefied, huddled together while the killers swirled about them. Then more Muslims roared down upon them, and when they left and the dust abated, Kafur saw the dead piled up for the vultures and crows that were already dropping from the skies.

He cupped his hands over his eyes. "There's something going on over there," he mumbled, looking towards an open space near the Mahasati. "I can't quite make it out: better go and see."

He descended with his guards, went into the street. The dust and smoke of burning buildings grated in his throat. His guards rushed away through crowds collecting their loot. "Way for the King's eunuch! Out of the way!" He passed through.

Close to the Chhatries, which marked the place of sacrifice, he found an excited crowd of soldiers around a group of Dancing Girls. "What's happening?" he demanded.

"These girls want to burn themselves to death. Look, they've got the faggots all set."

"The King's requirements come first. Way for the King's Chief Eunuch!"

Reluctantly they made a path to let him through; quickly he let his glance travel round the women. "Bring those two," he commanded the guard, then asked; "Are you going to let good woman-flesh burn?"

"No, no!, only this old hag. We've never seen a suttee. The rest we'll keep."

As Kafur left, he saw flames leap up, heard the crackle of burning twigs, caught above all the din a piercing scream as the Muslims threw the old woman into the blaze. "Boys will be boys," he murmured and went on.

It was late when he started back for camp, burdened with loot and with the three women pushed along by his guards. Already the sun had set in a flurry of crimson cloud and in the growing darkness a host of stars was swooping down upon the world. Palls of smoke still hung over the fortress, lit here and there by dying fires. There was the acrid smell of blood that stung his nostrils, and the cadent groanings of those to whom death had not yet come to release from pain. He looked down at the twinkling camp fires, stretching far over the plains below and beckoning to him. Upwards on the evening breeze were borne the sounds of Bacchic feasting and revelling. He hurried on, unwilling to remain longer in this place of death.

Thus ended the siege of Ranthambhor.

VII

THE long march back to Delhi had begun. The army, with the Sultan at their head, was strung out over the miles, a brave, resplendent show. There was the sense of autumn heavy in the air, with the accumulated sweetness of ripening things. The crops stood golding in the fields, but not yet reaped. Here and there a pair of Sarus cranes, french-grey and ruby capped, eyed listlessly from among the swelling spikes of corn, the passing hosts. Lakes were still full and fringed with the white and grey of water-birds. Troops of gracile black-buck bounded away as the head of the column approached. But nowhere could be seen man or his herds of cattle.

They passed by buttressed castles; through little hamlets deserted by all but the dogs that yapped like wolves; over flat dusty tracks; and onwards through the passes that lead to the rich Gangetic plains; over rivers now mere trickles but deep in the sands piled up by the monsoon floods. The Aravalli Hills ran along on their left persistently as a beggar-boy, now grey, now blue or smouldering in the sunset as the day wore on, their lower slopes clothed scantily in the green of Babul and Ber and the yolky yellow of the blossoming Anwal shrub.

At the head of his troops, riding on an elephant, 'Ala-ud-din's body swayed rhythm-

ically with the beast's long strides. Hour after hour his mind sought the answer to a question. Here was he, mighty conqueror, mighty Sultan of a far-flung kingdom, which seemed so stable, so builded on living rock. And yet, no sooner did he turn his back than someone tried to stab him there. His face furrowed with deep thought; he leant back in the howdah and gazed up at the sky. What was it that was wrong with his administration?

He had removed by death or blinding all legitimate claimants to the throne: each new aspirant, as he arose, had been put down. Still, undaunted by the fate of others, new ones kept arising. A feeling of oppression weighed upon him. How could he forestall these plots?

Suddenly he sat bolt-upright. "Espionage, espionage, that's what I've neglected," he told Kafur, who was sitting behind him. "It's no good regarding people just as chattels of the sovereign like dogs and horses. I must know what is going on in their minds."

He ceased speaking and let his thoughts wander unheard. He would enlist an army of informers. They must spy on everyone, great and small; report to him everything of importance that they heard. All that happened in the houses of his nobles and officers of state must be discovered and reported the day of their occurrence. Even the gossip and transactions of the market place must reach

his ear. And he would punish loose or dangerous talk with a severity which would make men afraid to converse one with another.

But this was not enough, he told himself aloud burrowing further in the underground of his disquiet. "Wine, wine," he muttered, "That's what loosens tongues, raises spirits, breeds plots and treason. All distillation and sales of wine must cease. And I won't allow social gatherings in the houses of the nobles without my special sanction. Not Nor marriages between members of their families, which bind them together."

He lapsed into silence again and sat brooding.

"Sire", said Kafur in his ear. "May I make a suggestion?"

"Speak on."

"It seems to me that idleness is the father of treason. Prosperity, which relieves many of the necessity for working for their bread, leaves them leisure for idle thoughts and mischievous designs."

"What is the remedy?"

"Despoil of their riches all whom you do not know are worthy of implicit trust, and drive them to work. Many of the Hindus, for instance, are rich and ever ready to lend themselves to foment revolt."

The Sultan nodded an acquiescent head and smiled: "Stop revolt and fill my coffers at the same time! Kafur, your genius is proved."

They rode on in silence, the Sultan deep in thought. Only when the midday heat fell like a suffocating curtain, did he awake from his reveries to order a halt.

That night, after he had fed, he lay on his bed under the stars. For a time he watched the moving legs of the sentries cross and re-cross the watch-fires. Over the camp stole the gentle rumble of sleepy gossipers and the stamp of tethered animals. A dog sniffing round the fire for food was chased by a sentry and slunk away into the ground shadows. Then his thoughts turned to the morning's ride and Kafur's advice. He had sought solution to his problem like a hunter; he had brought his quarry to bay. "As they've asked for it," he told himself, "they'll have to take their medicine. I'll turn the kingdom into a well policed hell."..... A sweet calm stole over him: soon he was asleep.

When he awoke the watch-fires were beginning to pale in the dawn and the air was chilly. He lay on under his blankets. The sentries were talking softly in sleepy mumbles, but reveille had not yet sounded. From somewhere in the distance came the tearing note of a ackal and an answering cry from far off on the ight. He lay on drowsily, watching the black

appointed and instructed to extort gold, on a pretext that could be devised, from all who possessed it. Soon gold was not to be found save in the houses of a few nobles and officers whom the Sultan was pleased to exempt.

Lastly 'Ala-ud din framed a special code of laws against the Hindus. In this he was actuated partly by reason of their faith, partly because of the wealth many of them enjoyed, and partly by their turbulence. In the words of his historian:—

“The Hindu hereditary officials enjoyed a percentage on revenue collections and the wealthier Hindus and those of the higher castes were inclined to shift to the shoulders of their poorer brethren the burdens which they should themselves have borne. All this was now changed, and it was decreed that all should pay in proportion to their incomes, but that to none was to be left sufficient to enable him to ride on a horse, to carry arms, to wear rich clothes, or to enjoy any of the luxuries of life. The government's share of the land was fixed at half the gross produce, and heavy grazing dues were levied on cattle, sheep, and goats. The officials and clerks appointed to administer these harsh laws were closely watched, and any attempt to defraud the revenue was severely punished. Hindus throughout the kingdom were reduced to one dead level of poverty and misery, or, if there were one class more to be pitied than another, it was that which had for

to converse in public except by signs. But underneath the murmurings grew. Men said that these ordinances seemed designed to punish actual rather than to forestall potential rebels. Flesh and blood could not stand these repressive and vexatious laws much longer, they declared. Better die than suffer such indignities.

It was Qazi Mughis-ud-din, one of the few ecclesiastics still frequenting the court, who stood forward to champion their cause. Fearlessly the old man appeared before the Sultan and voiced their grievances.

"Do you think I have exceeded my right in passing these laws and ordinances? demanded 'Ala-ud-din darkly.

"Sire," replied the Qazi. "Perhaps it will save both time and trouble if you pass an order for my instant execution, for never will I consent to spare even Your Majesty's feelings at the expense of my own conscience."

"Have no fear, proceed."

"As regards the laws against the Hindus they are less rigorous than the treatment sanctioned by sacred law for misbelievers. But I doubt that it is wise to enforce them among a public chiefly Hindu."

"Go on."

"Great dissatisfaction is felt about the apportionment of plunder from Deogir."

"But, great heavens, the enterprise was entirely my own. Why, no one had ever heard of the place till I decided to attack it."

"Nevertheless, part of it should have gone to the army, and a share to the public treasury."

"The army got a share—all that I'm going to give it, anyhow." Then angrily: "And what nonsense is this about the public treasury? Why, I wasn't even Sultan at the time I sacked the place." He paused, then added: "And what other grievances, real or imaginary, do you come to represent?"

The Qazi rose from his seat, retired to the place reserved for suppliants, touched the ground with his forehead and cried: "Your Majesty may slay or blind me, but I declare that all these punishments, inflicted for breaches of the new ordinances, are unlawful and unauthorized either by the sacred traditions or by the writings of orthodox jurists."

'Ala-ud-din rose and retired without a word.

The Qazi remained trembling for a time, then he, too, left the hall. At home he set his affairs in order, bade his family farewell and prepared for death.

On the following day he was summoned by the Sultan. To his surprise and infinite relief he was well received.

"Qazi-ji," said 'Ala-ud-din, "I want to thank you for your candour of last evening."

He smiled and bade the old man sit near him.

Soon he continued: "It has never been my desire to rule my people except in accordance with the law of Islam. But their turbulence and disobedience compels me at times to resort to punishments of my own devising."

Then he rewarded the Qazi with a bag of gold and dismissed him.

But people noticed that from that date prosecutions under the new ordinances grew fewer, and punishments less harsh. And they blessed the Qazi for his courage.

IX

SUCH was the atmosphere in Delhi when Balji Magal, minister and envoy extraordinary of Rawul Samar Singh of Mewar, arrived there on his mission of peace.

He reached the end of his long journey late one afternoon. Still, weary and beginning to feel chilled by the wintry breeze that was springing up as the sun lowered itself to its setting, he and his small escort sought eagerly the nearest serai. They found there already a polyglot assemblage of travellers. Greatful for the shelter of warm walls, the party proceeded leisurely to prepare the evening meal and to enjoy the prospect of freedom from the hardships of the road.

The journey had been uneventful; often deadly monotonous. Sitting hour after hour, day after day, cross-legged in his bullock-drawn carriage, Balji had found the miles heavy on his spirit. But he had contrived to stave off complete boredom by reminding himself, that not often did the opportunity of visiting a big city come his way. He would, he promised himself, make up in Delhi for all he had suffered in the getting there. Each time his thoughts dwelt on the ample funds with which he had been provided, a satisfied smile played at the corners of his loose mouth. Everything was set for a good time once this accursed bumping and jolting was over. The courtesans of Delhi, he mused, were famous all over the East: voluptuously he conjured up in his mind pictures of their charms, himself the central figure. Then, too, he had heard that these foreigners were exponents of many and strange eroticisms. He would sample them all.

By the burden of the work entrusted to him, he felt in no way oppressed. He had accepted the post of envoy partly because its importance tickled his vanity, but more specifically because instinct told him that in all political action there are pickings to be had. With the object of his mission he had no quarrel. War, in his estimation, was a puerile, ridiculous feature of life which only fools indulged in. How it had come to pass that his Rajput master had shown this present flash of intelligence was not clear to him; but certainly

it did not alter the general rule, that where the unintelligent are gathered together, there will be found the tinder for conflagrations. He and his fraternity's only concern with war was to safeguard themselves against its dangers, and for this they had a very simple formula—always come out on the winning side.

So, though he had no high hopes of success in his task, he was prepared to do his best in the cause of peace. If his efforts failed or the object underlying his mission were to be misunderstood, the situation, of course, might become delicate. Even this possibility troubled him little, for the wisdom of the Magak consists in the affirmation that the more troubled the waters, the better the fishing. He knew that this, and the philosophy his caste share with the chameleon, had proved their soundness through many difficult centuries. In fact, he felt in the happy position of a poker-player who holds a 'straight' open at both ends.

His first day in Delhi he devoted to going about, unobtrusively inquiring as to Kafur's influence at court. All he managed to learn pleased him greatly. Kafur was obviously well-hated: that to his mind was proof positive of Kafur's power. Everywhere he found the people venomous and helpless—a vast mass of pent-up slaves cursing under their breath the Sultan, Kafur and the other courtiers in favour.

He wandered about ogling any woman

whose face was uncovered. His venerous nusings had lit a flame of urgency which was scorching him. In one street a ragged pimp approached him and offered to lead him to a house of pleasure. With an effort he declined the immediate suggestion but gave the pimp his address, instructing him to send some more worthy agent with whom he could discuss business. He rewarded the pimp with a munificence that was intended to impress upon him, that only the best would be acceptable to its donor.

The next day he summoned a scribe, and with his help prepared for the eunuch Kafur a letter in flowery Persian. It announced his arrival, reminded the eunuch of their past acquaintance and asked for an interview as soon as possible. The letter was signed and sealed; the messenger stood ready. But a delay occurred. Balji could not make up his mind as to the value of the present which should accompany the letter. If he sent little, he might prejudice his mission at the outset. If he sent much, more would be expected later. Finally he entered in his accounts a substantial sum, invested about half in the purchase of silks and brocades for Kafur, and kept the balance to pay for the delights he promised himself that night. Then he despatched the messenger and sat back, comfortable in the thought that he had solved satisfactorily a difficult problem.

When Kafir received the letter, he opened it, giving but a cursory glance at the gifts which accompanied it. Presents from those who sought his help were frequently received by him and, unless of unusual value, occasioned him no particular thrill—he regarded them as routine additions to his income.

He read the letter over and puckered his forehead. He could not recall Balji's name, face or anything about him. But an envoy from the Rawul of Mewar, he decided, might be both interesting and profitable to cultivate. He, therefore, replied at some length, expressing his unbounded joy at the prospect of meeting an old friend again, and asking him to call that same afternoon.

Balji, resplendent in a dark-red velvet robe, the considerable cost of which had been debited to the accounts of the mission, and accompanied by a number of servants hired for the occasion was borne through the streets seated in a luxurious palanquin. He arrived before Kafir's house with a nicely calculated lateness that was intended to impress.

The eunuch received him with courtesy and no little show of warmth.

"Delighted to see you again, Balji, after all these years," he assured him, and went on to inquire about his health, the journey and his family.

Nearly half-an-hour passed in general talk before Kafur, who felt that by now it was time to know the other's business, said casually: "You mentioned some important state business in your letter, I think."

"It is of a rather confidential nature, I fear," the other replied mysteriously, "intended for the Sultan's own ear."

"I see..... But I thought you said you wanted my help."

"I do. I want you to arrange for me an interview with His Majesty."

"Unless I know the business, that may be difficult."

Balji remained silent for a time. Finally he said: "Well, I don't know why I should not confide in you," and told him the facts.

At the end the eunuch nodded. He seemed to be considering the subject. Then he gave his judgment:

"With the Sultan craving for further conquests, our ideas may be difficult to introduce."

"Surely there are richer lands still left to conquer than Mewar," suggested Balji.

"Isn't Mewar rich?"

Balji laughed. "Poor and unlovely as a noseless hag."

"No State jewels?"

"A few, but not worth the cost of taking. The only pearl of price in Mewar is the Princess Padmini."

Kafur gave him a quick glance out of the corner of his eyes. "The Princess Padmini! I seem to have heard the name."

"Probably you have; it's on the lips of almost every poet and singer in India."

"Is she really so beautiful? Tell me about her."

Balji, whose mind was full of visions of feminine delights, proceeded to give a description of Padmini that might have brought a flush of blood to the crutch of a monk. He became almost lyrical. He compared her in grace to a butterfly; her breasts to ripe peaches, fresh and smooth; her smile, he told his listener, was such that it could draw from a cactus the fragrance of a rose; as for her eyes, they were deep pools of delight, stained with antimony which would make the blackest bee envious. He paused for breath.

"And what is the age of this houri?" asked Kafur evenly, trying to hide his eagerness.

"Young as a lotus bud before it opens."

"Well, to get back to business," said Kafur. "I'll see what I can do for you."

X

AFTER Balji had left the eunuch remained for some time sunk in thought. So this princess, who was inspiring the singers of the day, was a real person! Till now he had imagined she was mythic. It seemed to him that in Balji fate had provided the key of a long-locked gate, leading to the garden in which dwelt that superlative addition to the Sultan's harem he had so far sought in vain.

But how to reconcile a proffered treaty of peace with an intended rape of Padmini? One could hardly suggest that she be handed over as the price of peace. That would be altogether too crude, if not actually poor strategy.

He remained deeply meditating this incognito in his mind

however probable, is only a pale shadow of fact and that he would be better advised to play a more subtle and complicated game. He felt confident that, left to take its own course, Balji's inherited avarice would sooner or later assert itself, and in the meantime any premature nakedness might lengthen the process and invite suspicion.

Later he went to see the Sultan and acquainted him with Balji's arrival and the alleged purpose of his mission.

"Seems queer," said 'Ala-ud-din, rubbing the side of his nose, as he always did when puzzled. "Do you think the offer is genuine?"

"As far as the Rawul is concerned, yes."

"Who else is concerned?"

"Balji the envoy, I presume, though so far he has done no more than hint at what is in his mind."

"And what is the hint?"

"That the Rawul has for wife the most perfect and beautiful lady in the land."

"Oh, your mind never rises above female breasts and thighs. This is politics, man, and politics and passion should be kept well apart. It's futile to mix them up. Look at Anthony and Cleopatra for example: but probably you've never heard of them."

The eunuch ignored this slur on his general knowledge: in any case his mind was concentrated on other matters. Genuinely perturbed at his master's attitude, he said, a little petulantly.

"But, Sire, the task you've set me—to find you the loveliest woman in the land? I've found her and now you refuse to help me bring her to your couch."

"Have you seen her?"

"No, but every poet in India is acclaiming her peerless beauty."

"Pah: all poets are romanticists. Anyway, keep the matter confined strictly to the political issues. Talk things over with Balji and come and see me again in a few days' time."

Kafur retired crestfallen. Now he had two obstacles to surmount, he told himself ruefully—the Sultan as well as Balji. "Better first find out definitely what's in that Magar's mind," he mumbled into his beard, and despatched an invitation to him to dine the next evening.

The entertainment—Balji was the only guest—was on a lavish scale: the food was rich, the wines choice and varied. After dinner, when well mellowed and the mere fact of finishing a drink had come to seem a good excuse for filling the cup again, Balji became expansive.

"How's the business going?" he asked his

host a trifle thickly, a loud and liquid belch following like a question mark.

"As well as can be expected... The difficulty is that the Sultan does not see exactly what he is to get out of the bargain."

"What does he expect?"

"Well now," replied Kafur, winking and at the same time giving him a friendly dig in the ribs, "You perhaps can answer that question best."

Balji's face went blank. "I don't quite follow you," he groped a little breathlessly for his ribs had been relaxed and Kafur's elbow was heavy.

"You mentioned the Princess Padmini."

"I only said she was beautiful."

"Of course; of course."

Balji sat silent for a time, looking into the purple depths of his half-filled drinking cup. What was Kafur driving at? He felt his words to have been pregnant but could not find a clue. Finally he looked up and asked:

"How does the Princess affect the issues?"

"Because she's peerless and.....the Sultan is never averse to add superlative beauty to his collection."

Balji made no immediate reply. He sat, apparently absorbed in deep meditation, watched by Kafur from the corner of his eye as he

pretended to be engrossed in selecting a sweetmeat from a large assortment at his side.

The mists began to clear in Balji's mind. Up to this moment the possibility of making profit out of Padmini's good looks had never occurred to him. His attitude to the whole business had been opportunist, but beyond a resolve to profit in some way he had framed no definite plan.

"I presume you have some plan?" he asked at length.

"Yes, and quite a simple one.....that iser...simple, if you agree to play your part."

"Let's hear it."

"Your Rawul asks for peace. The Sultan agrees. The Rawul, lulled into false security, is suddenly attacked. You open the gates; we enter and seize the Princess. Could anything be more simple?"

"And what do I get?"

"What's your price?"

"Five hundred dinars down and a thousand more when the Princess is in your hands."

"A trifle too high, I fear," said Kafur, remembering that he had been bought for only a thousand and unwilling that anyone should be bought for more."

"Well, that's my lowest figure."

"Alright - you shall have it."

Just before Balji left, Kafur told him "I've taken the liberty of sending a bunch of singing girls round to your residence. Have good time and, if you take my advice, you sleep with the little Circassian; she's very clever."

XI

JOGGING along in his palanquin through dark streets, Balji began to wonder whether he had not committed himself beyond the frontier of discretion. What would happen, he asked himself nervously, if their plans were to go astray? Visions of the Traitor's Window in Chittorgarh rose up before him. He had never seen anyone thrown from it, but on several occasions he had peeped through it, noted the sheer drop and the bare black rocks far down below. He shivered at the memory.

Suddenly he felt the world to be spinning round him. The unaccustomed Persian wine had not affected him while in the warmth of Kafur's house; but now, in the cold wintry air, their potency was exerting itself. He realized ruefully that he was very drunk indeed.

Arrived at the residence, which Kafur had secured for him, he had to be helped in. A little later, leaning on a bolster, his pagri thrown aside, he became aware of the presence of Kafur's 'lovelies'.

"Shing!" he ordered abruptly, and a little later fell asleep to a song of passionate love.

His major-domo woke him up.

"Shall I send these girls away?"

"Shwat gurs?" His head was nodding uneasily, his eyes were half-shut and his tongue failing to answer his brain.

"The eunuch's."

"Yesh.....shend way.....give preshent..... but shnot too shmuch.....shee?"

A memory seemed to smite him: he sat up with a jerk and shouted at the retreating girls.

"Hey! shnot the clever.....one. Shbring her back.....I'm going shleep with her." And he grinned amiably.

Half-an-hour later the Circassian woke up the major-domo.

"He's puked his bed," she announced prosaically.

"Dirty beast! Never mind, get in here." He pulled aside the bedding and moved over invitingly.

"All the same to me, but sure you've not been drinking, too?"

"Not a drop."

* * *

Balji awoke with a mouth dry as a brick kiln, a throb which seemed to strike hammer

blows on the inside of his skull, and a feeling of nausea in the pit of his stomach.

For a time he lay, his eyes closed, trying to recall the events of the night before which were eluding his mental grip with the fluidity of quick-silver. There was a slight rustle and he opened his eyes to find the major-domo at the bedside.

"Good morning, Sir. Did you have a good time with the little Circassian?" he heard the question.

Balji could not remember if he had or had not. But he did not want to give himself away, so answered, "Yes, grand."

"Well, she wants to go home now.....I suppose you wish to reward her; how much shall I give her?"

"Five dinars."

"Very well, Sir." And he turned quickly to hide the grin he could not suppress.

XII

KAFUR awoke, fresh and bright and immensely pleased with his night's work. "Well over the first jump," he told himself, rubbing his hands. "Now for the second one." And he sat down to study the ground.

Obviously the first step must be to persuade the Sultan that he did not desire peace with

the Rawul, and the second, that an agreement, whereby your enemy feels assured of a long spell of immunity from attack, is the finest possible preparation for an assault designed to take him by surprise. The most dunder-headed tactician would agree to this latter proposition.

In the Sultan's present state of mind, the third step was not going to be so simple. It necessitated implanting in the Sultan such a burning desire for Padmini as would overbalance his declared principle never to mix politics and passion. And what a ridiculous principle! Why the very nature of passion was that it could mix intimately anywhere.

sent chance to further by guide the successful execution of a plan for his annihilation, and should be accepted with every outward show of willingness.

Of course, if he could persuade the Sultan to agree this far, the problem of Padmini might solve itself. On the other hand the Sultan, he knew, was preparing plans for a raid south and the attack on Chittor might be postponed indefinitely. This possibility rankled with Kafur, for he considered that he owed it to himself to fulfil the role of the perfect pander, and he was by now convinced that achievement of this ambition depended on the rape of Padmini.

Well, he told himself in the end, one step at a time: first get the peace treaty signed.

His interview with the Sultan took place the next evening. The time was carefully calculated to find that worthy mellowed by his evening drinking.

The Sultan listened attentively to all Kafur's arguments. He seemed impressed, but asked at one point: "What more has Balji told you about the Princess?"

"Sire, in view of your orders, I have not dared to discuss this matter with him," he lied smugly.

"Probably just as well," agreed the Sultan, but Kafur thought he could detect a trace of regret in the tone.

Before taking leave Kafur received instructions to draft a letter of agreement to the Rawul's proposal and to have it ready for signature the next day. He returned home in an exhilarated and vivacious mood. Everything was going, he felt, in the best Kafurian style.

Then he sent for Balji.

"Well, my friend," he told him when the two were closeted together a little later, "things are going well. The Sultan will sign an acceptance of the Rawul's proposal tomorrow."

Balji felt his heart beginning to beat fast. He had had all day to think matters over, and by now was filled with alarm at the prospect of the part he had agreed to play.

Kafur, sensing what was going on in the other's mind, asked chaffingly: "Not trying to back out of the bargain are you?"

"N...o:" replied the other. "But it won't be easy."

"Nothing is ever easy that is worth doing," commented Kafur sententiously, then "But think of the good time you will be able to have with those fifteen hundred dinars."

Balji's eyes reflected the avarice in his heart. "Well, I'll do my best," he confirmed.

"By the way, one point," Kafur told him finally. "When you go to see the Sultan and receive the letter, on no account make any

mention about the Princess. There are always ears listening at court, and this is a matter to be kept strictly a secret between you, the Sultan and myself. Do you understand?"

"Yes, and where and when shall I receive the five hundred dinars?"

"From me, before you leave. Don't worry."

* * *

Two days later Balji was summoned to appear before the Sultan. A state palanquin was sent for his use with a considerable retinue to attend his progress. He was duly impressed and his chest swelled with pride as he was borne through the streets before the admiring gaze of all.

Arrived at the palace he was met by Kafur and conducted to the hall of audience. Just before entering Kafur whispered in his ear: "Now remember, not a word about the Princess." Balji nodded in acquiescence.

The Sultan was sitting on a low gold couch, his legs crossed; there were armed guards behind him and on both sides. He acknowledged Balji's low obeisance almost imperceptibly. A number of trays on which were arranged silks, shawls, some jewels and a variety of gold trinkets—gifts from the Rawul—were brought in and set before the throne. The Sultan threw them a careless glance and remarked: "Of no great worth."

"Sire," said Balji nervously, for he was responsible for their selection, "Mewar is but a poor State, but my master trusts you will accept these trifles as a token of his friendship and esteem for you."

"Yes, I'll accept them.....and return gifts, of equal value." He waved his hand for a servant to remove the trays, then continued: "I have heard all you have told Kafur. Is there anything you would like to add?"

"No, Sire, at least I cannot think of anything at the moment."

"Well, here's my reply to your master. Present it to him with my compliments and such gifts as I shall select later to send him. I suppose you will be returning to Mewar at once?"

"As a matter of fact, Sire," put in Kafur hurriedly, "I think our friend is worn with many days of travelling, and would like to recuperate for some little time, before setting out again."

"By all means stay," agreed the Sultan, "as long as you wish." Then indicating Kafur with his thumb, he added: "You will be *this* gentleman's guest for the period."

Once again out of the palace, Balji gave vent to a sigh of deep relief. He had made a handsome profit on the purchase of the gifts, and had got away with it. Then thoughts of

the Sultan's grumblings were relieved by the knowledge that Kafur had been let in to pay for his entertainment. One of his rare smiles lit up his face. That was the kind of humour he appreciated.

He returned to his residence, sold off all supplies in hand and sent in a list of his requirements, including wines, women and pretty boys, to the eunuch. This was life indeed.

Kafur received these demands with a shrug of the shoulder. The Sultan should pay eventually, thus he promised himself, and, in the meantime, he cursed Balji venomously by the only Hindu imprecation he knew: 'May he be reincarnated in the womb of a harlot.' After that he felt better.

The days that followed were for Balji all that his salacious imagination could picture as desirable. He lived 'in the high perfume of insolence'. Each evening crimson-curtained carriages drew up at his door, bringing for his entertainment torrid damsels 'robed in rippling creases of delight'. Kafur had handed him over to Delhi's leading expert in the arts of venery, a lady who enjoyed the soubriquet of 'Eternal Springtime Queen', though by now her burly charms were chiefly confined to the luring of rich men to her many salons. In these she debauched them, to her own considerable gain, with wine, women and song, in an atmosphere reeking of sandal-oil and nard.

fumes, later selling them potions brewed of anteater's flesh and guaranteed to restore virility or to cure diseases born of lechery.

Kafur's object in pandering thus to Balji's viciousness was twofold. Firstly, his own plans needed time for their perfecting, so Balji must remain in Delhi, to be at hand when required. Secondly, he suspected that Balji was nervous of the part he was cast to play: so his thoughts must be distracted. But at times, even with his soiled background of experience, he felt pause at the thought of condemning youthful beauty to the embraces of this unattractive and middle-aged guest. He could picture Balji's smallpox ravaged face, his ragged moustache drooping over his large, loose mouth, his drunken lecherous grinning. At such times he spat volubly to ease his disgust.

At the end of a week Kafur asked Balji to call on him. There remained two matters concerning which he required information—the gate of Chittor that would be the easiest to get opened, and how Balji could communicate with him from inside the fort.

Balji, faced with the necessity for giving a definite reply, said he would have to decide the first matter after the attack had actually commenced.

"What will not a goat eat, or a fool say?" commented Kafur with heat, and then explained: "The whole idea is that the attack and

the opening of the gate shall be simultaneous. My plan is for the army to hide up some distance off and then make a forced march as soon as we hear the gate will be open."

"I see."

"I'm glad you do. Now how can you get a message to me?"

"I could throw a message wrapped round a stone over the wall."

At what point You'll have to choose some spot where the drop is more or less vertical. Is there such a spot?"

Balji considered the matter for a time, and then said uneasily: "Yes, there is a place like that, but....."

"But what?"

"Well, it's below the Traitor's Window."

Kafur laughed.

"And you think it's unlucky. Well, you'll have to take a chance. We'll be on the look-out for messages.....or for a broken body, if you fail.....below the Traitor's Window."

Balji returned to his house silent and depressed. The hectic life he had been living had played havoc with his nerves, and this reference to the Traitor's Window had grated on them like a rusty saw. In his heart he was deeply troubled, and, as always at such times,

he turned to his gods and sought to buy their aid. He visited a temple and made a burnt offering to Kali; he sent the gift of a goat to Mataji; begged a charm from a Sadhu and rewarded him with gold. Then he drank deep and for a time forgot.

Two days later he set out upon his return journey, but not before another omen had brought him to the verge of a nervous breakdown.

He had noticed the Sultan pass upon his great tusked elephant, Alum Goman, The Arrogant of the Earth. Following the crowd, he found himself outside the palace walls. A space had been cleared in the centre of the crowd and the Sultan was sitting there high up in his howdah. Two men stood before him.

"What's happening?" Balji had asked.

"Alum Goman is about to trample two prisoners to death," he was told.

"Who are they?"

"Traitors."

Balji had fled from the scene as fast as his shaky legs could carry him.

XIII

"IT'S a most extraordinary thing," observed the Sultan to Kafur one evening, "but all the singers you have been providing for me lately have only one theme for their songs."

"Oh," replied the eunuch. "I'm afraid have not been present on every occasion. What is that theme?"

"The Princess Padmini."

"Quite a coincidence, isn't it?"

"Yes, quite: that is unless they have been acting under your instructions, Kafur."

"Your Majesty," said Kafur with airy ease, his head slightly on one side. "Your Majesty surely can't think that! You know how temperamental are professional musicians the world over. They would never tolerate dictation of that nature from me or anyone."

"I suppose not," the Sultan agreed quietly. "But I find this incessant harping on that lady's charms somewhat perturbing to my peace of mind."

* * *

So the heaven is beginning to work, Kafur thought to himself as he prepared to go to bed that night. "But I musn't overdo it," he concluded aloud.

His plan was based on recognition of the simple psychological principle that, if you repeat a thing often enough, it sticks, and is apt even to return like gentle eructations after a heavy meal. At the outset he had contrived schemes of great ingenuity, only to discard each in turn as dangerously complex. Once,

in desperation, he had consulted 'Eternal Springtime Queen', and her suggestion had been a love philtre made from the claws and droppings of an owlet boiled at full-moon to the accompaniment of incantations. But Kafur knew the Sultan ate no food except that cooked by a slave who was incorruptible. In the end fate had played into his hands in the shape of a travelling minstrel, who, at a trial of his talents, sang to Kafur unmasked a lay of the lovely Padmini, and agreed to compose as many more as were necessary—for a sum.

As for 'Ala-ud-din, his jaded palate ever demanded new and strong flavours. He saw quite clearly Kafur's hook in this affair but yet could not help nibbling at the bait. He became angry with himself for what he felt was weakness, and vowed more than once to take a strong line with the eunuch. But anon there drifted back into his mind this haunting refrain from the minstrel's song: "Padmini, pink as dawn, gentle as curling wave". And resolve evaporated like dew before the rising sun.

Finally he sought excuses for his mental strayings. Had not he agreed to peace with the Rawul with the very intent of making easier the sack of Chittor? And, if in the process, he gained this woman of his dreams, what harm? 'Ah!' said an inner voice, "that must come later. The Mongols are becoming bolder with each month. Even now they are raiding your northern provinces. Beat them first, soundly;

secure your frontiers, and then you may think of Chittor." And so he dallied, undecided.

Further and further south raided the Mongol hordes. Delhi became alarmed. "Why was nothing being done to stop their progress?" people asked.

It was the old Qazi, Mughis-ud-din, who once more came out to champion their cause.

When he had stated his case before the throne, 'Ala-ud-din rose up, his face livid with rage.

"Will none of you do justice for me of this interfering priest?" he flung at his courtiers

Some one sprang on the Qazi and slashed him with a razor. Another stabbed him with a packing needle. It was the Sultan's own son who finished the business by throwing the old man to be trampled by an elephant.

As the poor crumpled body was being borne away for burial, followed by a crowd too shocked and stunned even to wail, there sprang up one of those storms that in India darken the noonday sun. The sky grew black and riven; and a screaming wind whipped down from the north to raise great columns of dust and sand, to uproot trees athwart its path, tear off roofs and go weirding through the streets and alleys of the city. Then was it that men bowed their heads and whispered one to another: "'Tis God's anger for the killing of this faithful one."

And some months later, when the monsoons failed so utterly, that, from the Punjab westwards through Rajputana and Guzerat right to the ocean's shores, the land remained one vast and thirsty dust-bowl, the calamities that followed were held to be God's retribution for this dastard crime.

Where food for man, fodder for beasts and water for both were unattainable, plans for campaigns became mere idle dreams to be fulfilled only in some dim and future period of time. 'Ala-ud-din's life through all this time of waiting was ruled by a sense of utter frustration. He refused to listen to his minister's plans to still the clamour of his starving people—he just ignored them. Black-pinioned, paralysing, the news flew through all the land that, in their dire extremity, no help could be expected from the Sultan. He had gone mad, men said.

And then came news that the Mongols had withdrawn, across the Himalayas, to meet invasion by yellow hordes upon their own fair lands and homes. Thus to his tortured mind was added the maddening knowledge that, but for this famine, the way had opened, almost miraculously, for the attainment of what by now had become an over-ruling passion.

Kafur's experiment in psychology had succeeded: only too well.

Autumn passed into winter, cold and sere. Once 'Ala-ud-din left the palace to mount a

horse and gallop out into the open country beyond. He rode head down and heels pressed tight to his horse's flank, as if in desperate effort to escape himself. But the sights and smells that assailed his eyes and nose, and the floating, bloated corpses of those who in their torment had sought relief by drowning in the river, drove him back to his retreat, where for hours on end he sat bent, brooding and delving in the dark of his disquiet. At other times he would drink deep, or seek forgetfulness in acts of frenzied passion. But so lowering had become his mien, so harsh his moods that before him his women quailed, and in their sullen matings he found no joy but only further weariness of spirit. For him, it seemed, time simply refused to move, and ever and anon he would pass a hand across his brow trying to wipe his throbbing thoughts away.

At last came spring, when warm billows of air brought to him the scent of sun on blossoming orange and pomegranate trees. Soon would the long imagined moment be arriving. But this year—he cursed the realization—he must perforce await the setting in of rain, so that supplies of grass and water would be assured along the line of march.

One day he pulled himself together sufficiently to summon Ulagh Khan and Kafur to a consultation. Impatiently he awaited their arrival.

"I have decided," he announced to them almost before they had completed their obeisances, "to march on Chittorgarh immediately after the burst of the monsoon."

"You'll have to wait till the grass grows," his brother reminded him, "for there's not a bundle of hay for the horses to be found in all the land."

"I'm aware of that."

"If Your Majesty is considering the strength of the force needed," said Kafur, "I think I have some information that may help you decide that issue."

"Speak on."

"Does Your Majesty remember the Mewar envoy, Balji?"

"Yes; what of him?"

"He is ready to open the gates for us..... for a consideration, of course."

"How much?"

"A paltry three thousand dinars, payable at once."

"A high price, I should say."

"Not weighed against the help he can give and the *spoils* that await, perhaps Your Majesty will agree."

The Sultan nodded. "Well, let it go, but I hope he can be trusted."

"I'm hoping so, too."

"Very well, draw the three thousand dina from the treasury. And now let's get down to detailed plans."

Finally it was decided that Kafur should use the services of another Magal to get touch with Balji. "He can take him the money at the same time," instructed the Sultan, and Kafur understood that the order should be carried out. Already in his mind, however, he had allotted five hundred plus interest to recompense of the advance given to Balji, and to balance to the fulfilment of the promise made to himself, that in the long run Balji's expenses while his guest should be borne by the Sultan. As for the thousand promised when Chittor fell...well Balji would certainly have to meet with a mortal accident in the confusion of the moment.

Through this new emissary Balji must be instructed to look out for a triple column of smoke across the Ajmer Chittor road. That would mean the Sultan's force was within striking distance. It was then for him to intimate the time and date when a gate would be opened, by dropping a message from the Traitor's Window.

When his officers had withdrawn, 'Ala-ud-din paced his room for a time. He told himself that the time for action was near, the dark hours of his intolerable waiting almost past. To-night he would feast and listen to his singers.

He drank sparingly that evening and ate with a relish unknown for many a day. When Catalani—a new arrival in Delhi—came in to sing, he asked her if she knew any songs about the Princess Padmini.

"Certainly, Your Majesty. Many times I have had the honour of singing before her and her lord."

The Sultan felt his heart begin to race.

"You've seen her! You know her!... Come sit here before me and tell me all you know."

"What can I say except that earthly beauty has never matched her's. No voice, no pen can portray more than a shadow of her loveliness."

"And her husband?"

"A veritable Sun of the Hindus."

Both fell to silence but at the Sultan's heart began to gnaw a canker-worm of jealousy. His countenance grew clouded.

"Sing me a song about the Princess," he said at length, "but let there be no mention of her lord."

Then Catalani sang:

"Day may not come, Padmini, while you
sleep;
Still darkness broodeth o'er the dewy land;
Scentless the rose that has not known your
smile;
All nature listless waits for you to wake"

"And lo! when through the veil we see
 you step,
 Pink as the dawn, soft as the curling wave
 The cloud wreaths calling bid the earth
 rejoice,
 And spring-time's bird song fills the scent-
 ed air."

XIV

THE monsoon broke over Delhi in the last week of July. Torrents of rain fell to wash the land clean of its erstwhile filth. The Jumna rose in spate, flooding the countryside for miles on each side of its hidden banks. Morning and evening mists spread from the waters to shroud the city; fever broke out among the troops and citizens.

"We'll have to risk taking an even smaller force than I intended," the Sultan told Kafur. "I propose to start at the beginning of August, come what may."

It was during these days that Catalani, the singer, began to add two and two together. 'Ala-ud-din's insatiable love of songs about Padmini had often caused her wonder; the military preparations she now saw everywhere changed wonder to suspicion. But it was over-hearing a chance remark made by the eunuch to the Sultan that confirmed her fears. That same day she called one of her servants, a trusted son of Mewar.

"Take this bag of money," she told him. "Spare no expense; spare not yourself nor your horses but ride post-haste to Chittor. Tell the Rawul that I'm certain the Sultan plans to capture his lovely queen."

A few days later she saw the Sultan ride off at the head of his troops. The force consisted entirely of cavalry and was without siege weapons. "No need for anything like that," 'Ala-ud-din told his generals, "we'll find the gates ready and open for us." Catalani noticed a closed carriage bringing up the rear of the column. That's to bring back the Princess, she decided, and uttered a fervent prayer that her messenger might reach Chittor in time to give the warning.

A few days out of Delhi news was brought to the Sultan that Mongol raiders were again in the neighbourhood and in considerable strength. Unwilling to risk battle with so small a force, he retired into his fortress of Siri. Here he was beleaguered for two whole months, while the Mongols plundered the surrounding country and even made raids into the streets of Delhi.

These months were a time of great trial for all his officers and men. 'Ala-ud-din fumed and swore. Their slightest misdemeanours were punished by savage cruelty in which alone he seemed to find distraction. Men hardly dared to look at him. Then as suddenly as they had come, the Mongols vanished from the land. Some said it was due to prayers offered

by holy men; but, whatever the cause, all ranks gave a sigh of relief. Now the march westward could continue.

Yet further trials awaited them.

Once out of the fertile Gangetic plain the grass became scanty and ill-grown. During the short hours of halting the animals could not find time enough both to till their bellies and to rest. Marches had to be cut down to give more time to graze. Later, colic broke out among them and many died. Between Alwar and Amber the force had to halt for nearly a fortnight to procure remounts from Delhi. Here many of the men, too, went down with dysentery and fever, and the camp stank to high heaven as is the way when dysentery breaks out.

All these delays were a pain almost insufferable to 'Ala-ud-din, who passed it on to all around him. At times, Kafur, who was accompanying the Sultan, wished profoundly that he had never plotted to interest his master in this princess, whom Fate seemed so determined to protect. Once he had gone so far as to suggest to the Sultan that the project should be abandoned, adding that he would leave no stone unturned to find a substitute for Padmini.

"God damn and blast you, eunuch," 'Ala-ud-din had stormed at him. "You may die, the army may die, I may die, but till ther

never will I give up this quest. Suggest it again at peril of your life."

And so they rode on, slowly and painfully, towards the setting sun.

sheep and goats were moving bags of bones and vermin. Still with the money the jewels had brought, he could now do much to help his people.

And this era of peace which had been guaranteed by the Sultan, he told himself repeatedly, was going to help enormously. So much of the money that in the past had been spent on armaments could now go to the rebuilding of his kingdom. 'Ala-ud-din's letter, bearing the imprint of his five fingers as the ritual seal and solemn testimony of his sincerity, he caused to be framed and hung up in Padmini's room, and often glanced at it with gratefulness and pleasure. In it he saw the promise of destruction giving rightful way to prosperity and peace.

He sent everyone to work, even the Rajput soldiery. "No one can remain a Rip Van Winkle these days," he told them, and they, though they grumbled, bent their necks, for they realized his rod was strong. By the end of August the country round was patterned with a carpet of green fields. Inside the fortress the walls resounded to a tumult of noise, for Rattan Singh had collected every blacksmith and carpenter in the land and set them to building carts to bring the harvest home when ripened.

Then on one day there arrived two wearied travellers—one, about midday, to visit his relative Balji, who has recently been promoted

to the rank of Bhanjguruh (Premier) for his services in the interests of peace; the other, late in the evening, with an urgent message for Rattan Singh himself.

The second arrival announced himself as Catalani's servant. Listening to his words, Rattan Singh felt as if his world was tumbling down about his head. Hardly could he credit his hearing.

"But are you sure, man, are you sure?" he asked, his face drawn. "I have a peace pact signed by the Sultan himself: I simply cannot credit such infamy as you suggest."

"Sire, can anyone be sure of anything in life? And yet the suspicions of Catalani's mind fit the facts her eyes and mine have seen as key fits lock."

Rawul Singh sat silent, his mind too numbed for thought. After a time he said: "I owe Catalani a deep debt of gratitude, and you, too, my friend."

"Sire, no need to talk of gratitude between Sovereign and loyal subject." Then he bowed and went out.

Presently Rattan Singh sent for Gorah, and acquainted him with the facts. Said that worthy, very evenly and with hardly a trace of surprise: "Well, we did our best to secure peace, but all along I felt there was a catch in the Sultan's too ready acceptance of the offer."

A faint smile passed over the Rav harassed face. "And you were right apparent

"Anyway, now we know where we st we'd better waste no time in preparing to r the invaders."

"Yes, and get Padmini away and into hiding."

"That's if she'll go, which I doubt..... the way, when do you think we may expect to be attacked?"

"Any time now."

"Oh: then I'll double the sentries tonight and call a council of war for to-morrow, shall I

"Please."

Gorah went off and the Rawul, left to himself, sat pondering the shattering of his dream. After a time as if decided on some urgent action, he got up and climbed the stairs to Padmini's room. She was already in bed. He bent over her, smiled and lightly touched her hair. "I'll be with you in a few minutes now," he told her.

Undressing, he wondered how she was going to take the news: what her reaction would be. Coldly, almost mechanically and without passion he began to curse 'Ala-ud-din and all his Muslims. Why should the brave and decent of the world continually be harassed

by the cunning and the wicked? he asked himself, but could find no answer.

And, later, when gently and quietly he broke the news to Padmini she did not understand at first. When she did understand she refused, with a fire that thrilled him, to consider even for a moment the suggestion that she should leave Chittor. "Rajputnis don't run away and hide in times of danger: they stay by their husbands' side and live with them or die with them... Have no fear: never will I fall into the power of this hateful Turk."

After that she cried a little. "Not out of fear," as she explained between her sobs, "but because of all the trouble I am causing." Later, her body limp against his, she fell asleep, her head resting on his shoulder.

But sleep did not come to Rattan Singh. He looked down at Padmini and recalled her words. He knew exactly what she had meant—death by fire rather than dishonour. For the women of his incorrigible race, that for centuries had scarcely known an unbroken year of peace, the thought of suttee was never long absent from their minds. It was the price they had to pay for their fathers' and husbands' warlike inclinations. But that he, Rattan Singh, who hated bloodshed and longed to still its flow; that he, of all men, should now have to endure this terrible prospect for Padmini—that was too much.

Just before dawn, worn out by anxiety, sleep came fitfully to him. Then, after what seemed to him only a few short minutes of oblivion, he woke to hear Gorah's voice outside.

"Yes, what is it, Uncle?"

"With your permission, I propose to send out messengers at once to summon the clan."

Yes, do.....and bid them hurry.

II

THE arrival of Balji's alleged relative caused no uneasiness to anyone except Balji himself. Delighted with the recent and considerable additions to his fortune, he had come to dwell on these and memories of the good times enjoyed in Delhi and to forget the lurking presence of the monkey's paw. So it came to him as something of a shock to find he was being called upon to honour his bond at a date in the no far distant future.

And when the next day he realized that the Sultan's plans were no longer a secret, his liver turned to water.

"Go back and tell Kafur," he urged the other frenziedly, "that the Rawul has discovered the plot and it is useless to proceed with it."

"And take back the five hundred dinars to him," the other suggested with a wry and mocking smile.

"No, no: I'll keep those...After all I gave them valuable information in exchange."

"God help you, my friend, if ever they catch you...But I'll deliver your message."

Balji breathed more freely as he saw his unwelcome guest pass out of the Rampol gate. He hurried back for an interview with the Rawul. What he could not understand was how the news had leaked out and he was determined to find this out.

The Rawul, who had no suspicions about his minister, told him at once about Catalani's message. If I'd only learnt that earlier, Balji thought to himself, I'd have let the Sultan know and got that woman skinned alive for her meddling. Aloud he said: "The situation, Andataji, is serious. Grain stocks in the fort will hardly last a month of siege."

"I know", agreed the Rawul, "and till the crops are reaped, there is no possible chance of augmenting them. We'll have to go on half-rations from the beginning."

"Why not go against the enemy before he reaches here?"

"I certainly would have done so, but due to the famine, the horses are in a deplorable condition and quite unfit to take the field."

Thinking over the prospects later, Balji made up his mind to leave Chittor before the

enemy arrived. He buried his ill-gotten gains in a lonely spot near the old tank, and girded his lions for flight. With characteristic indifference for the fate of others, he decided it would be taking too great a risk to try and get his several wives and many children away at the same time. They must take their chance with the rest, he told himself with a careless shrug.

It was young Badul, now armed and accoutred to take his part in the defence, who found Balji preparing to let himself down over the wall by a rope one night. Badul was doing rounds and, with the enthusiasm of the young, doing them thoroughly. "What the hell are you doing here, Balji?" he demanded.

Balji's usually fertile mind could think of no excuse at the moment.

"Trying to run away, I believe," said the young soldier, then added: "Well, I'm going to take you along to see my father." And, resting the point of his sword in the Magal's back, he ordered: "Now march!"

Gorah's summing up of the case was terse: "Filthy skunk!"

Balji, his mouth opening and shutting like a new-caught fish, had nothing to say, but he begged that the Rawul should not be informed of his attempted desertion.

"Very well," finally agreed Gorah, "the Rawul shall not be told.....as yet, at any rate;

he's got enough troubles as it is. But I'll have you watched from now on. What happens to you afterwards will be decided by your behaviour during the present crisis.....Do you understand? Good, then get out of my sight."

III

DAYS grew into weeks and yet the straining eyes of those who watched from the battlements could detect no clouds of dust heralding the approach of an invading army.

Sometimes, as the slow days passed, Rattan Singh began to doubt the reliability of Catalani's information. Once Balji had contemptuously expressed this opinion: "Just a damned harlot's fairy tale, I expect."

"One, however, which you took seriously enough," Gorah had reminded him, and the Rawul wondered why his minister's mouth closed like an oyster immediately.

Then news reached them by a traveller that 'Ala-ud-din's forces were mobilized and in the field, but their advance had been delayed.

"It's lucky learning that," Rattan Singh told his officers, for I was just about to send the clansmen home."

Then one day, far off where the road from Ajmer bends to cross the Banas river, the watchers saw three high columns of smoke rise like pillars in the air.

"That's the Muslims," said Balji. "They are now within striking distance."

"How do you know that?" demanded Gorah eyeing him suspiciously.

"Well, I mean to say, what else could it be?"

"Another harlot's fairy tale, perhaps," suggested his tormentor.

But Balji's guess (or knowledge based on information) proved correct. That same evening mounted scouts had returned to say that the Sultan's army was encamped on the banks of the Banas, but did not appear to be as large as usual or to have brought siege batteries with them.

"Probably expected to take us by surprise," commented the Rawul.

"Even then they would need battering-rams to force the gates," Balji hazarded.

"Unless, of course, someone had offered to open a gate for them," said Gorah and noticed that Balji's face went ashen. "I wonder if that chap is up to any tricks?" he asked himself inwardly and with deepening suspicion.

Up on the battlements that evening Rattan Singh and Gorah, the setting sun behind them, looked out over the plains.

"Leisure is too fine a garment for constant wear," Gorah remarked. "I'm glad it has come

to this, low though the Toork's motive is for the action he is taking." These indeed were the strong flavours that his peace-jaded palate demanded.

In Rattan Singh, too, something was stirring. For all his contempt of those who glorified war, the dastard treachery of the Sultan had shocked him to the core, and now instincts inherited from his martial forefathers, who had 'drunk of the wave of battle', were coming into play. Anger clouded his face as he continued to gaze at the softly darkening landscape.

Presently Badul joined them. In the last few months he had grown, with a suddenness that surprised even his usually unobservant parent, into a beautiful and vigorous lad. The excitement of the present made him glow with added life, and his large eyes were fired with the expectancy of action.

Rattan Singh thought: Must keep this lad out of the fighting. He's too young yet to be exposed to danger. Aloud he said: "I want you to look after Padmini, when the show begins. Will you?"

"And the best way to do that is to be in the front-line helping to drive away the Toorks, isn't it?" he asked eagerly.

"Not this time. I'm going to place you on duty at the Deorhi gate."

Badul looked crest-fallen. Rattan Singh suspected that tears were not far off. So

he added: "It's a post of great honour, you know."

"Yes, Sire," he replied quietly and slipped away.

Later Rattan Singh again went up on to the battlements. He had taken his evening meal with Padmini and was making a last round before retiring for the night.

The night was breathless: liquid moonlight poured out of a velvet sky, patterning the world around in black and silver. Trees stood out like dark columns casting clear-cut shadows across a bleached white land. Even man-made buildings seemed at this hour to be part with nature. The whole scene indeed struck Rattan Singh, as he stood there, as being under some curious influence, waiting with indrawn breath for something that was about to happen.

From the scrub-clad hillside below, mystery laden in the starshine, came an occasional grunt of wild pig or call of jungle beast. And inside the fort, filled now with dense, vibrant life, he could see his troops, silhouetted black against their camp-fires.

Presently he descended and went to his bed.

"Do you think they will attack to-morrow?" Padmini asked him.

"Impossible to say, but we must be ready.....By the way I've placed Badul on duty over you to try and keep him out of harm's way."

"I'll do my best to keep him at his post, but I'll probably have to use a chain," his wife told him as he dropped off to sleep.

Dawn found him on the battlements again. Slowly, as the grey light increased, the landscape sorted itself out. Presently he fixed his gaze on what had at first appeared to be a low mist at the foot of the opposite hill, the one on which Chittorgarh had first been started but had been abandoned at the demand of a Sadhu who dwelt upon it. Then he noticed that the mist was lengthening: a few minutes later he divined the truth. The mist was the Muslim army approaching.

"Sound the alarm," he ordered a staff-officer.

It started as a low tremulant roll and gradually grew in intensity till the whole air seemed to be throbbing to the growling beats of the war drums. Gate guards turned out and mounted the bastions, and everywhere men could be seen tumbling out of huts and bivouacs, buckling on their accoutrements as they ran. Presently they fell in under their chieftains and were marched off by bands to their allotted posts.

Rattan Singh, intent on these movements, felt rather than saw Jaysu at his side.

"I've brought the Bara-boora's favourite sword for you to carry this day," he heard the

old man say. "It is a blade that can sever rocks."

"Thank you, Jaysu." And then in a low whisper. "I place the Rani's honour in your hands.....Do you understand?"

"I understand." And he was gone.

Watching the Muslims deploy as they approached the fortress, Rattan Singh with Rana Lakshman and Gorah tried to guess their plan of attack.

"Don't believe they're going to attack at all," grumbled Gorah. "They seem to be going to invest the place."

"I believe you're right," agreed the Rana. "They're dispersing their forces far too widely for assault."

And far down below the Sultan 'Ala-ud-din, as he gazed up at Chittor smouldering in the sunrise, was cursing with a strange and terrible vehemence. Balji's failure to play his part ruled surprise and immediate assault completely out, since his army was unequipped with anti-fortress weapons. Now he must sit down and starve the garrison out; and that probably would take months. Then, too, before final surrender these Rajputs, he knew, had a way of killing all their women. He shuddered at the implications of this knowledge. Some other way *must* be found if Padmini was to be saved for him. In the meantime he vowed that, come

what may, Balji should be made to pay a hundredfold—may a thousandfold—for his bungling and defection.

IV

A month fulfilled its bleak course and still the Muslims kept their distance and unceasing watch and ward. Occasionally the garrison would make a sortie, but as there was no question of breaking out and leaving the fort, these merely served the purpose of killing off some of the enemy and capturing a few prisoners.

"It's almost as bad as that peace you imposed on us," Gorah grumbled to Padmini. "Why the hell don't they attack and give us something to do?"

"I too, wish they would," said Rattan Singh. "Grain stores are dwindling rapidly."

A few days later Gorah volunteered and was given permission to lead another sortie, in the hope of discouraging the foe. He selected an encampment of grass huts, on the plain below the Surajpol gate and somewhat isolated from the rest of the army.

Collecting a troop of picked Rajput horsemen, he had the gate opened and galloped down the steep path with a ringing "Hur! Hur!". They were on the enemy almost before they could realize what was happening. A Muslim commander came out of his bivouac on hearing the shouts. Gorah transfixed him with his lance

to the door of his hut, and his men, setting fire to the buildings, slew the Muslims as they sought to escape the flames. They were back inside the fort, unscathed and with a captured Muslim standard, before the enemy had recovered from their surprise. Badul who had been watching from the top of the gate rushed down to meet his father. "Shabash, Shabash!" he shouted, helping him off his horse. "And the next time you're going to do that sort of thing, I'm coming, too."

But neither this success nor others that followed had any effect in lifting the siege though the enemy kept a more respectful distance from the walls, and Rattan Singh began to visualize the end. For himself, sweet though life was, he hardly gave a thought. But for Padmini, his incomparable Padmini, the prospect filled him with the keenest anguish he had ever known. She would die, too, of course: but why should such tragic destruction of so much loveliness be thrust upon him by the frolic lust and wilfulness of one who already owned so much. Then, too, it hurt his kingly pride to think that those, who had trusted to his protection, could not be saved by the might of his right arm. And, like many another in his hour of trial, he turned to his gods for succour.

A few evenings later, eating the dung of humiliation for he had just passed through the bazaar and seen the faces of children gaunt with their pitifully insufficient rations, he strode

up to the parapet, from which he could see the enemy watch-fires just being lighted and stretching in a vast semi-circle below him. There was a distant rumbling of thunder and lightning played over a bank of black clouds in the west. Just a storm, he told himself and will probably pass over.

But it did not pass.

Before nightfall the whole heavens were thundering in almost unceasing roar, and blinding flashes of lightning tore the skies from end to end. Then came the rain, perpendicular, remorseless, torrential.

"Quite unseasonable, of course," was Rana Lakshman's comment, "but it will give our friends below a pretty unpleasant time."

When Rattan Singh woke, he became aware that the monotonous drumming of the rain had ceased. The palace was enveloped in stillness—a pleasant stillness broken only by the heavy drip from the eaves. Then, a little later, a lightening of the room told him that dawn had broken. He got up and went out.

Up on the battlements the air was cool and clear and under the sun's first rays the desert glittered like the sea. Clearly earth and sky were in happiest mood.

But when his eyes sought the enemy's camp through the cleanness of a dust-freed atmosphere, he smiled grimly. There was no

rejoicing but only bitter confusion and distress. Almost every grass-hut was a soggy heap, and away, where stood the pillar denoting the Sultan's headquarters, a crowd of men could be seen spreading out soaked grain to dry in the morning sun. "That mouldy grain should give them a bellyache," he said aloud to the world in general and went back to tell the news to Padmini.

Then some days later the sentries on the walls reported that the enemy's pickets seemed to be smaller than usual and that there were fewer patrols moving about.

"Better send out scouts to-night and discover what's happening," suggested Gorah.

The scouts reported that things seemed fairly normal but they thought they could detect the foul odour of dysentery in some quarters.

"Pray God it spreads," said Rattan Singh devoutly and then paused..... "I wonder," he added to Padmini, "if the gods are answering our prayers."

V

IN the Muslim camp Kafur, the eunuch, once again was having a difficult time with his master.

"The Prophet's curse upon you, Kafur," the Sultan growled. "It was you, you damned

intriguer, who persuaded me to embark on this madness."

"Only with the best intentions, Sire."

"Best intentions or worst, it's all the same, and it's up to you now to find a way out."

"I have been giving the matter much thought of late, and think I can suggest a solution."

"Then out with it, man, and why in God's name have you been keeping it to yourself all this time?"

Kafur ignored the question and proceeded to expound his plan.

"Seeing that direct assault is not at present feasible and that bribery has failed, it might be well to try deceit."

"Deceit always appeals to you, I know. But get on."

"My humble suggestion is, Sire, that you should send a letter to the Rawul to the following effect. The only reason why you broke the treaty of peace was that you had heard the Rawul was harbouring some Muslin deserters. You have recently discovered this information to be incorrect and you are proposing to raise the siege and return to Delhi. Kafur paused to lick his lips.

"I don't see any light

"Well, in the same letter you can say that you have heard the Rani Padmini's beauty extolled so often by singers and poets, that you are most anxious to see the original. But, in order that the lady may not feel embarrassed by the request, you ask merely to be allowed to see her reflection in a mirror."

"What a hell of a time you take to get to the point! Get on, man."

"You will offer to go into the fort unarmed and unattended, trusting in the honour of the Rawul not to detain you."

"Yes, and then?"

"Well, having seen the Rani, the Rawul will accompany you back to the gate. There you will have to use great tact and manage to get him to accompany you further. At the bottom of the hill is a quarry. In this will be hidden a party of our men. As you come up, they will seize the Rawul."

"But, you damned idiot, it's Padmini I want, not the Rawul."

"Exactly, Sire," and Kafur smiled.

"Stop smiling, you fool, and explain."

"The garrison of Chittor will then be informed that unless the Rani is handed over, her husband, the Rawul, will be put to a painful and ignominious death before their eyes."

"Hum!" said the Sultan his brow puckered in thought. "Ingenious, I admit, but not fool-proof by any means."

"Yet worth the trying, I suggest, Sire."

"Yes....worth the trying....Go and write the letter and get it off before the whole damned army dies of dysentery....And, by the way, you can be the messenger."

"I, Sire?" said the eunuch aghast. "Balji might give me away."

"Then, you give *him* away. I'd love to learn he was dead, the swine." Then added as an after-thought. "What happened to all that money you drew from the treasury to pay to him?"

"The deceitful one kept it, Sire."

"Meaning by that Balji or yourself?"

"Balji, of course, Sire."

VI

RATTAN Singh was snatching a few hours' relaxation with Padmini in her lake-palace. As so often in these perilous days he was oppressed by a sensation of uneasiness in her presence—a sensation which often, too, now-a-days troubled him in his sleep and followed nightmare. The horror he had always felt for suttee had now grown almost to be an obsession. In his dreams he saw red flames reaching out

to engulf all that he held most precious and with his naked hands he sought to keep them back from her. Then he would wake, wild of eye, panting, dry-tongued.

Padmini realized something of what was going on in his mind and tried to temper it with reason.

"If the worst does come," she told him quietly, "then I only have to follow the path of honour that thousands of Rajput women have trodden before me."

"Oh : I know", Rattan said almost brutally, as if some force from outside was whipping him on. "You're going to tell me the old story, that in each stage of life death is waiting round the corner ready to claim our women—by *poppy at the dawn of life, by flames in riper years."

"It's true, isn't it ?"

"Of course, and that's what maddens me. What's the good of being a king, if you have not the power to right what is wrong, unjust and beastly ?"

"Shush, darling. You're over-wrought," she tried to soothe him. "Anyway the fort still stands, so why think about such things ?"

Then she made him lie down and close his eyes. A little later he was asleep.

* Female infanticide was widely practised among Rajputs. Often a baby girl at birth had a piece of opium placed in her mouth, was put in an earthenware jar and then buried. In a few places in Rajputana this practice still exists.

Sitting beside him she knew that in her heart were just the very thoughts that troubled him. Neither was thinking of their own life or safety but of the other's. Each would willingly give life twice over to save the other one. But that this grand, virile body of her man should be torn or mangled, his brain which held such high and noble thoughts be shattered, or his voice, which had come to sound for her the most perfect music in the world, be stilled—those were possibilities too devastating to endure, and she felt that ice was dripping from her heart. Then it was that she prayed, as never before, that, when this man she loved more than life attained his * hundred years, he might cross gently and silently "the fine line that separates being from not being": that he might be saved indignities of violence so foreign to his nature.

Once or twice he moved restlessly in his sleep, and then, soothingly, she patted him as a mother pats her child.

She sat on till the swift dusk of autumn began to fall. The palace grew quiet. Far off she could hear the vague rumble of the garrison preparing its evening meal or the distant challenge of a sentry at his post.

Presently she got up and went out into the verandah. Her white doves fluttered down for their supper. She had just finished feeding

* An Eastern and figurative expression for dying.

them when Rattan Singh awakened. He called her name and she went to him at once. A smile, which welled up like day, lighted her eyes and sent out beams which mingled with the springs of his devotion.

"I feel better for that," he said and took her in his arms.

"I've been dreaming," he told her a little later. "I was sitting by a fountain when suddenly the waters grew troubled and the lotus leaves that floated on them parted. Then out of the waters came a seven-headed horse, like Septaswa which draws the Sun-god's war chariot."

"Oh; but that must be an omen that the Sun-god is going to fight for and deliver us," Padmini said excitedly.

"I hope so, but I do not know. Legend says that the Sun-god in olden days used to fight for our race, but then a wicked minister polluted the fountain with blood and the charm was broken, so that he never came again."

"But your dream shows that the charm is restored," and she smiled into his eyes.

It was about the second morning watch of the following day that a messenger came running to Rattan Singh to say that a party of the enemy were approaching with a flag of truce.

"A flag of truce?" He looked puzzled for a time, then ordered: "Find out what they want and then come back and tell me."

He called to Padmini in the next room, and she came running to him.

"But how exciting," she told him. "Can I stay till you know what it means?"

"Of course."

Half-an-hour passed with maddening slowness. Then Gorah came in.

"Here's a letter for you from the Sultan," he announced. "I dropped a string to haul it up. I didn't feel like opening the gates to let them in, as the leader of the party requested."

"Quite right," agreed Rattan Singh, breaking the seals.

Rattan Singh read the letter with amazement and rising anger. Suddenly he threw it on the ground. "The damned impudent swine!" he exploded.

"But what does he say?" asked Padmini.

"Read it for yourself, if you like."

Padmini took up the letter and together she and Gorah read slowly and a little painfully for the script was not easy for them, its contents.

"It's a strange request," she commented at last, "but an easy one to grant."

"I'll see him dead and you dead too," stormed Rattan Singh, "before I grant it."

"But, darling, darling, we ought to think of the lives of all the others here, before we reject it."

Rattan Singh and Gorah both looked at her in some surprise.

"Let's sleep on it," said Padmini, "and in the meantime tell the messenger to come back to-morrow at the same time for an answer."

"I second that proposal," This from Gorah.

"Very well," agreed Rattan Singh.

* * *

Leaning back on a couch that afternoon, his eyes half-closed and a little giddy from the drain and strain of the past weeks, Rattan Singh asked himself for the hundredth time where lay the trap in this request. If there was no trap, no danger to the garrison, he knew Padmini had been right. Neither he nor she could allow sentiment, even impertinence, to stand in the way of their deliverance from the certain death that lay ahead unless the siege was raised.

But what a most extraordinary request! How came he to think of making it? What satisfaction could he gain if it were granted? He, Rattan Singh, could find no answer to these questions, nor could any of his Chiefs or officers. "Can we be expected to follow the workings of a barbarian's mind?" had been their unanimous comment on the subject.

At the end and before nightfall, Rattan Singh summoned Balji and dictated a letter. The Sultan might come next afternoon. He must be unarmed, of course, but he might bring a retinue of six officers, if he wished. His request would be granted and his safety guaranteed. It was understood that immediately afterwards he and his army would leave Mewar and not return at any rate till the ten years of peace agreed upon had lapsed.

The next morning the letter was signed, sealed and duly delivered to Kafur who arrived to receive it.

VII

MORNING was approaching. In the courtyard of the palace servants were beginning to move about, and Genda, the elephant, greeted the arrival of his Mahout with a shrill trumpeting. Morning to him meant a bath in the Hathi Kund, the lake reserved for the *hati log*—the elephant people, and he dearly loved his bath. Then from the temple of Deogi came the blare of conches and the ringing of bells as the priests commenced their morning devotions. The sound of the bell was a signal for every dog in the bazaar to lift its head and howl as is the wont of the canine pariah tribe throughout the East.

But when the conches, the bells and the pye-dogs once more lapsed to silence, there

settled down upon the whole place a vague, indefinable hush of expectancy.

Padmini rose early and Rattan Singh watched her, sitting among her maids, commence her toilet. She looked up as he went out, and on her face a smile fought to hide a look half-wistful and half-troubled, as if a little bewildered at what lay ahead.

Rattan Singh, as was his daily habit, went up on to the battlements. He made a round of inspection and then sat down alone on a distant corner of the wall.

The sacrifice of his tenderest feelings to the duty he owed those who trusted him was still searing his mind. Jealousy played no part in the struggle: he did not mind decent men seeing her at any time. But this 'Ala-ud-din, from all he had heard of him, was not to be numbered among the 'decent'. A blood-thirsty, sensual barbarian, a scourge to India, his presence with his army seemed to Rattan Singh as a dirty tide polluting this land of Mewar. He could not imagine any one with the instincts of a gentleman making such a request: even Ala-ud-din himself had practically admitted at it arose out of nothing higher than vulgar curiosity. A cheap sensation was what this barbarian wanted..... and at Padmini's and his expense.....pah!

From the look he had seen on Padmini only half-an-hour or so ago he knew the idea was

just as hateful to her. But she, he began to realize, was possessed of a calm attachment to the highest good that made suppression of self a natural consequence. In this, he now knew, she was more strong than he. Somehow he must get himself under wise and full control before the Sultan arrived. It would be unseemly if he lost his temper or in rage broke his plighted promise of safe conduct to his enemy. As he struggled with his feelings he began to suspect that women were better exponents of selfabnegation than were men, though the latter talked most about it as a rule.

Well, there was no turning back now, he told himself, and he would go through with it. And since with this impertinence went a promise of immediate cessation of hostilities, he deliberately turned his thoughts to the morrow. The Muslims gone he would be able to take up again the strands of delicate web he and Padmini had been weaving for the betterment of their kingdom. True the shape and texture of their final plans still lacked sharp outline due to the set-back caused by the famine, but its preparations were in train. Perhaps he could use their recent close and unpleasant tryst with death as an argument with his clansmen, that war is not lovely for its own sake, nor the most fitting occupation for men, and that those who think it is are but dwellers in the darkness.

Then, the issues clearer in his own mind, he got up, shook himself as if to be rid of

doubt and hesitancy, and returned to the palace.

As soon as the sentries announced that the Sultan was approaching, Rattan Singh went to the Surajpol gate. He climbed up the narrow stone stairs to the top. The Sultan at the head of a small mounted escort was just reaching the foot of the hill. Rattan Singh saw him dismount, start to climb the paved path and noted that the escort was retiring. Then he went down to the gate, ordered it to be opened and awaited the guest.

The picture that Rattan Singh saw—one that was to remain like a cancer in his memory—was of a man in his early thirties, powerful and broad-shouldered but only of medium height. He had a short well-trimmed beard and a long angular nose. His lips were full but firm. He was dressed in the usual Muslim style of the day—long pleated coat, bound at the waist by a coloured kammerband, and below this loose brocade trousers. On his pagri and around his neck glittered an array of magnificent jewels. His complexion for one of his race was dark, but seemed less so by reason of eyes that were startlingly fire-shot, roving and bold. Yet Rattan Singh noticed that they imparted a curious impression of questioning. If those eyes of his are the pulse of his soul, Rattan Singh thought, he's as nervous about the meeting as I am.

As the Sultan entered the gate, Rattan Singh raised his hands, palms together and fingers stretched upwards, to the level of his chest, and received a similar salutation from the Sultan.

"Welcome to Chittorgarh," said Rattan Singh with that oriental courtesy to a guest, in which private likes or dislikes must be submerged by the sacred duties of hospitality. The Sultan replied with the Muslim greeting of Salaam Alekoun.

"You have come unattended, I notice," said Rattan Singh.

"Yes, I sent the escort back," the Sultan smiled. "You see, I am not ignorant of the high tradition of Rajput honour."

"I thank you for the compliment."

Together they passed out of the shadows of the great gateway, past a guard of honour and took their seats in a golden howdah set on Genda's broad back.

As Genda padded slowly along, Rattan Singh pointed out to the Sultan the various palaces, lakes and buildings around them.

"It's a fine fortress," said the Sultan in uneasy and halting Hindi.

"And a strong one, too," Rattan Singh reminded him.

"Surely," agreed the guest.

Inside the Tripolia gate, Genda halted and slowly dropped into sitting position. The Sultan and Rawul climbed out of the howdah and immediately after entered the hall of audience.

At the end of the room the Sultan saw what appeared to be a low tent. In this sat the Rani Padmini on a cushion; before her at a short distance and supported against the wall was a large mirror.

Rattan Singh noticed that the Sultan halted a pace and he wondered what was going on inside his mind. Then he heard the question: "Where am I to go?"

"If you will stand behind that covering, facing the mirror, the curtain will be lifted and.....," he forced the words out of his throat, his fingers pressing into the palms of his hand till the knuckles showed grey through the skin "your request will be fulfilled."

It is doubtful if ever before or since such melodrama has been played upon the wide stage of human history. An outraged husband fettered by pledged word and duty to his clansmen, standing sullen and silent, his eyes turned away as if refusing to be witnesses; a would-be lover, whose word till now had ever been a law and who had never known refusal to advance, hot for lust and seared by months of inability to quench his fires, yet powerless even now except to gaze distantly at the one and all-transcending passion of his life, unattainable, misty, remote

and mirrored as mirage: the woman fiercely determined to save those she loved yet equally determined never to yield honour or body to this suitor—these were the actors on the stage.

Slowly the curtain lifted.

Rattan Singh heard a quick intake of breath by the other, heard the breath held.

At first Padmini's eyes were downcast. She knew her pulse was racing wildly; she tried to reason with herself. Then for a moment she raised her eyes to meet in the mirror those of the Sultan. There was something in them that startled her: they seemed so cruel, so evil and yet so furiously alive. She dropped her own again.

The Sultan's gaze remained rivetted on the reflection in the mirror. Upon his mind was being graved indelibly the impression of a rounded face entrancingly lovely, eyes shadowed by long curling lashes, and lips faintly parted in the inscrutable smile of Mona Lisa.

Suddenly he pulled himself up straight, bowed to the mirror and turned.

"I must thank you and your charming Rani for the honour you have done me this day," he said, his voice level and without a trace of embarrassment.

Rattan Singh bowed in acknowledgement, but words would not come.

"And," went on the Sultan, "if you will permit me to say so, the poets and singers of India are one-eyed craftsmen: their songs about your wife tell only half the truth."

He moved towards the door, Rattan Singh following. Hung on the wall near the exit was the peace treaty. "What's that?" he asked.

"The peace treaty signed between you and my father."

The Sultan gave a hoarse short laugh. "Yes, I'm sorry to have broken that," he said "but I was misinformed. Shall we assume that it is renewed as from this hour?"

"That would give me very great pleasure."

Arrived again at the Surajpol gate the Sultan turned as if to take leave. "Isn't that the envoy your father sent to me?" he asked jerking his head towards where, at some distance, Balji was standing.

"Yes, that's Balji."

"I do not love traitors," said the Sultan darkly.

"Nor I," replied the other. "But why speak of my Prime Minister and traitors in the same breath?"

"Walk a bit down the road with me and I'll tell you."

Slowly the two, the Sultan and the Rawul descended the path, while the former told the story to a listener aghast.

"You can thank Balji for all the trouble you have had. When you return I trust you will put him to death: he really deserves it. And if you can get back the large sum of money he took from me, I shall be grateful."

"He shall die this day before sundown," Rattan Singh assured him.

Suddenly he was seized from behind, pinioned, thrown on his back, roped, lifted and carried off.

VIII

FEW inside Chittogarh slept that night. It had been left to Uncle Gorah to break the news to Padmini. He found her lying on a couch when he went in. The strain had been great and she felt the need for rest. She did not look up when he entered and he stretched out a hand and touched her forehead tenderly.

"Back, darling?" he heard her say.

Getting no reply she looked up.

"I thought it was Rattan, Uncle. Isn't he back yet?"

Gorah told her; saw her eyes become stony frozen; watched the blood drain from her face and neck; heard her arm drop on the couch as consciousness faded out.

Next morning a Muslim herald approached the gates and announced the terms on which

the Rawul would be released. The little world within the fortress was aghast. Alone of a Padmini rose to the occasion. "Tell the herald I accept the terms," she ordered. "details will follow."

Then she summoned Gorah and Badul.

"Padmini, Padmini, we can't let you go, she heard them say.

"Fear not for my honour," she said quietly an arm round the shoulder of each. "Jaysi has provided the means of escape," and she showed them a small locket containing poison.

Uncle Gorah broke loose from her arm and sat down. "Look here," he said, "we've got to find a way to save you *both*."

Little by little from the small seed of determination, a plant sprouted, waxed great, came to fruition, tended and helped by the joint planning of the three conspirators.

In the end, intimation was sent to the Sultan, that on the day he withdrew from Chittor the fair Padmini would be sent to him in exchange for her husband, but in a manner befitting her and the Sultan's high station, surrounded by her females and handmaids, not only those who would accompany her to Delhi but many others also who desired to pay her this last mark of reverence. The Sultan was requested to issue strict commands to prevent the curiosity of his soldiers violating the sanctity of female decorum and privacy.

Before dusk fell that night every arrangement which the conspirators had planned had been completed. One hundred covered litters had been collected and stood ready on the open space behind the Surajpol gate. One hundred of the bravest of the garrison had been selected to travel in the litters. For each were provided four soldiers disguised as litter-porters; and in each litter now rested a sword and shield for each of its four bearers. Uncle Gorah was to travel in the leading litter and command the force at his own special wish and ordering.

That night Gorah, Badul and Aunt Jodhi all dined with Padmini. After a meal of no better fare than served to the troops, the Lord of Rhymes came in. Going up to Gorah, he begged his sword. Then he sat down, the sword before him and blessed it in these words: "By the preceptor Goruknath and the great God of Eklinga, by Takyac the serpent and the sage Harita, by Bhavani, strike!"

Presently Aunt Jodhi arose and stood before her husband, her eyes half-closed, her hands together in front of her. She paused awhile, trying to control the flutterings in her heart. Then, as is the custom of her race on the eve of battle, she gave this exhortation to her man: "Victory and fame to my lord! Oh, son of the Chohans, in glory or in pleasure who has tasted so deep as thee! To die is the destiny of gods as well as men: all desire to throw off the old garment: but to die is to live for ever. Think

not on the morrow of self, but of immortality: let thy sword divide thy foes, and I will be thine other half in heaven."

"To listen to the two of you," laughed Gorah, "one would think I was going to lead a forlorn hope, instead of one of the jolliest little picnics ever planned." He pulled Aunt Jodhi to his side, put an arm round her and went on: "By the way, Padmini, haven't you got just a little something to drink to the success of to-morrow?"

"Just one bottle left, Uncle," said his niece and produced it.

"Well here's to your reunion with that grand husband of yours," he toasted and emptied his cup to the dregs. He filled it again and looking at Aunt Jodhi said: "And here's to you, my very dear wife!"

* * *

A mile away Rattan Singh sat in his tent heavily chained and guarded, dejected, stunned almost. The Sultan had just informed him that he would be released next day in exchange for the Rani Padmini.

A thousand times he cursed himself for having fallen into this trap. What a simpleton he had been! And now what could he do? Nothing, he felt sure, would deter Padmini from her sacrifice. The only course left was to

back, collect a force and try to recapture

But in the meantime.....He felt sick at certainty of what would be her fate.

Strange fancies come to one whose mind heart are flogged and drooping. Several as he thought he heard her call his name. got up and looked about him, straining his to catch her voice again. Then, desperately, threw himself upon his couch with a rattle of chains, only to feel God had forsaken him to taste the bitterest dregs of degradation and despair.

IX

At the fort a message had been received, early the following morning, that the Sultan was agreed to accept the terms proposed. His army was packing up to go and would set-out on the day as the Rani reached his camp. A short time would be given to the Rawul to bid farewell for ever to his wife.

Behind the Surajpol gate Rajputs, armed head to foot, were entering the litters, pulling the curtains around them. Gorah stood by and watched.

Suddenly at one side a brawl started among the litter-porters. "What the hell are they fighting about?" he demanded.

"Just a young man ousting a porter who he is too old to carry the load," he was told.

"Good lad!" he commented, little knowing that the lad was Badul, his own son.

Slowly the gates were folded back and the procession began its swinging progress down the steep and slippery pathway leading to the Sultan's camp. The ramparts were lined with men, and the wailing of women rose at the departure of their beloved queen. Gorah had left no detail lacking to procure a truly realistic effect on those who might be watching from a distance.

Slowly, slowly, the procession, strung out snake-like over the plains below, moved onwards towards the Sultan's camp. Presently the watchers saw the leading litter disappear into an enclosure fenced by tent-screens, and shortly followed by the rest. Now the heart-beats of all who watched began to beat faster and louder, but none so fast or loud as for Padmini and Aunt Jodhi seated pale, tense and stony-eyed on a bastion near the gate.

* * *

On a crimson brocaded ottoman, in a gorgeous tent supported by gilded tent-poles, hung round and carpeted with the rarest products of the looms of Cashmere, Bokhara, Shiraz and Teheran, sat Sultan 'Ala-ud-din. But at this moment little recked he of royal state. Padmini in a hovel was worth more than all his palaces, his seraglios, his wealth of gold and

silver, his hoarded treasure of gems, his dreams of world-wide conquest. Ever since he had seen her in the mirror, he had known scarcely an hour of peace. Passion and longing had run riot through his veins, his wits blown feather-wise by hurricanes of craving.

And now, watching the sand falling smoothly in the hour-glass before him, the long days and hours of his yearning, he knew, were drawing to a close. When the last grain had fallen, Rattan Sing, his farewell over, would be speeding on his way. He stood up and put his arms out ready to embrace her, to enfold her, his whole body trembling with anticipation.

The last lagging grain slithered through the narrow waist of the hour-glass. He got up and called aloud to Kafur.

"Bring her to me," was all he said and Kafur went to do his bidding.

He stood there breathless, his face tense and drawn with the greatness of the moment.

Suddenly his expression changed. He stood listening intent, his eyes fixed, his head turning in short jerks as if to capture sound. Then he dashed from the tent, upsetting the hour-glass as he went.

Outside ordered confusion met his gaze. A line of fully-armed Rajputs blocked the way, providing a cover for others hastily arming. And behind them he could just glimpse a rider allying towards the fortress of Chittor.

"After him, after him," he screamed. "A year's pay to the man who slays or catches him And turn out all the guards."

Slowly, bloodily the clansmen fell back before ever-increasing pressure. Five hundred against thousands.

Once Gorah, fighting desperately, looked momentarily at the companion on his right.

"Good God, Badul! What the hell are you doing here," he managed to gasp.

"Just...come...to join the picnic...you.. mentioned...last evening," was the reply he heard, punctuated by deep breathing and grunt as Badul fighting like a young lion, cut viciously at a Muslim head.

"Well, since you are here," his father told him as he found breath or opportunity, "collect some of the men and fall back and hold a line we can retreat through."

As he withdrew, Badul looked back. A round Rajputs were falling but on the way they had come lay, writhing, ten times as many stricken Muslims.

He collected some fifty men and retired to the bottom of the path leading up to safety and the Surajpol. Thence he watched the battle saw his side retiring pace by pace, close pressed fighting like devils possessed. In the confusion and dust thrown up by the conflict, he could not at first single out his father. "God! I hope he'

all right," he breathed through his teeth. Then he saw him, saw him go down upon a pile of his own victims. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Minutes seemed like hours till the sorely-pressed line was upon them. They opened to let them through and then took up their fight. But how few were this remnant halting behind their cover, seeking to regain breath, to staunch their gushing wounds.

There was to be no rest, no let-up in the tempo of the battle. For the Muslims at this point it was now or never, and they pressed home their attacks with fresh troops and redoubled vigour.

Backwards, ever backwards, fighting each step, the upward gradient giving them some slight temporary advantage, retired the gallant band. Then at last—how far away they had seemed!—the shelter of the walls. A storm of javelins and arrows from the closely-manned battlements halted the Muslims. In that brief space the gates swung open and the survivors poured in—less than fifty of the five hundred who had gone out so bravely barely two hours before.

Badul sank down exhausted. He was badly wounded in the face and shoulder. For a time he lay panting, his mind a blank. Then he heard a voice, his mother's.

"Badul, Badul, my son, my son!"

She sat down by him staunching the flow of blood, her whole being concentrated on her task. A little later she asked: "And your father my lord?"

"Dead on the field."

He heard her choke back a sob. "Tell me how did he fight?"

"He was as a reaper of the harvest."

"Yes?"

"On a gory bed of honour he spread a carpet of the slain; a barbarian prince his pillow, he lay him down and sleeps surrounded by the foe."

"And you, Badul my son?"

"I followed for a time his steps as a humble gleaner of his sword."

X

WHEN Rattan Singh had regained the shelter of the gate, his first, his only thought had been for Padmini. "Where is she?" he had asked, throwing himself off his panting horse. And, told that she was in the bastion, he had gone to her straightway.

Aunt Jodhi withdrew as she heard him coming up the steps. Moments like these were sacred and not for the prying eyes of others.

Beyond the first ecstatic "Rattan", "Padmini", few words passed between them.

They clung to each other with a violence that sought to purge their minds and hearts of the doubt and dull despair that had held them, and to make room for immense peace and beautiful reality. He whispered and rewhispered her name, softly, as if it was the most beautiful sound on earth.

After a time he said: "Who thought out that plan?"

"Uncle Gorah and Badul chiefly."

"And you...what part did you play?"

"I helped all I could."

"Well, it was magnificent," he said and pressed her to him again.

Then suddenly: "But we're being selfish, darling. Out there men are fighting and dying for us."

He took her hand and together they went out on to the balcony.

Then: "Stay here, beloved, I must go and take command." He left her but was glad to see Aunt Jodhi returning as he went.

It was Rattan Singh who organized the hail of javelins and arrows that halted the Muslims as soon as they came within range and permitted the survivors to regain the fort.

But later when he called the roll, his heart bled. Over four hundred and fifty of the pick of the clan killed or missing. And Gorah, Uncle Gorah, among them!

"When it gets dark," he told his officers, "we must go out and bring in the wounded."

"There are none," he heard. "We watched the Muslims murder them all as they went back."

A great groan escaped him. In his heart had been the hope that Gorah at least might have been found alive, however great his wounds.

He went back to the Palace. There Padmini met him, her face ashen, her eyes wet.

"Aunt Jodhi says she is going to commit suttee at once," she sobbed out on his shoulder. "Can't you stop her?"

But Aunt Jodhi was determined. "Would you wish me to damn my soul forever?" she demanded. "And think, think! What would the years ahead be worth? Would you have me go on day after day, week after week, year after year never seeing him, never hearing him? A thousand times better death and to rejoin him."

At the pyre side that afternoon, surrounded by all within the fort, stood the Rawul and Badul. Presently a procession of women approached headed by Aunt Jodhi. The crowd pressed forward to touch the hem of her dress, for in such sacrifice was blessing, or so they reckoned.

She walked composed, utterly without trace of fear, dry-eyed, serene. Halting before the pyre she unclasped her jewels, one by one, giving them as parting-presents to her maids.

"Light up," she ordered, and while the timber began to crackle, the fire to catch hold, she turned to Badul.

"Tell me again," she said, "how did my beloved acquit himself in battle?"

"Oh: mother, how further describe his deeds when he left no foe to dread or admire him?"

A smile lit her face; she clasped him to her in one long last embrace and then with: "My lord will chide my delay," sprang into the flames.

* * *

A night of lamentation for the slain, and Rattan Singh well knew the aftermath that must come, when the news became known in the homes of those that had died that day. Fires, fires, fires, he told himself till his soul was sick.

He lay tossing on his bed, pleasure of reunion and pain from knowledge of the cost chasing each other through his throbbing mind like light and shade. But the deepest wound was the loss of Uncle Gorah. Ever since the old Rawul's death, it was Gorah to whom he had ever turned for help and encouragement. Now he was gone, gone, he told himself, and wept.

Dawn found him haggard and heavy-eyed, worn out but quite incapable of sleep. Padmini,

too, lay there, her eyes swollen by weeping. For her the loss of Uncle Gorah and Ann Jodhi were crushing blows, hardly softened by her husband's rescue. "He died for us, Rattan he died for us," she kept repeating. "Oh Uncle, Uncle!"

They lay on miserable, clinging to each other, trying at times to comfort one the other, only to find that comfort would not come to either.

Then on the morning breeze drifted a sound, low and distant at first, but gradually swelling till it swept in one great roar across the whole hill-top.

Rattan Singh sprang up, slipped on his clothes, grabbed a sword and rushed out. He was met below by Rana Lakshman Singh.

"What is it? An attack?" he asked breathlessly.

"Andataji," the other smiled. "It is the shout of victory.....The Muslims have broken camp and left."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite. There's not a sign of them except a cloud of dust that marks their homeward march, and the thousands of dead they leave behind."

"Why do you imagine they have left?"

"Let their dead answer you. They suffered very heavy losses yesterday."

And then Chittorgarh went wild with rejoicing. The wounds and bruises of the day before, gaunt hunger of half rations, fear of the fate that till now had hung like a black cloud over them—all were lost or forgotten in the common sense of deliverance. In the reaction of excited cheerfulness, rich and poor for the moment, forgetting class and caste, became as one. They left the walls, their posts, their houses and the bazaars to surge round the palace. Somehow everyone felt the urge to go there, to see and congratulate their ruler. And two days later, the dead buried, the gates open and carts arriving stacked high with food, their joy rose to new heights, became unbounded.

It was a few days later that a memory came back to Rattan Singh: it smote him as a stone between the eyes. "My God!" he almost shouted. "I'd completely forgotten what the Sultan told me about that traitor Balji."

"What did he tell you?" asked Badul whom Padmini had insisted on bringing to her own quarters to nurse.

Rattan Singh told him, told also Padmini, and when he had finished his story, Badul added his, of how Balji had tried to desert one night.

"I'll have him arrested at once," Rattan Singh said, "and we'll try him this very day."

It was a puling, whining, trembling creature who, heavily chained, stood some hours

later before the seat of judgment and the assembled Chiefs. He had nothing to say, indeed seemed almost unable to speak coherently. If there had been nought else, his very demeanour would have been sufficient proof of overwhelming guilt.

To all present the Rawul repeated the information given to him by the Sultan, and then, standing up, passed upon Balji the sentence of death. His words, scorching and precise, rang through the whole hall: "Thou stain upon the Hindu race, thou impure of blood, dust be on thy head as thou hast covered us with shame. May your name die with you!"

The guards dragged him from the room, for his legs hung as if paralysed. Slaving at the mouth, eyes rolling, and mouthing: "Mercy, mercy, mercy," he was taken out and tied upon a donkey. Then, followed by a crowd which, but for the guards, would have torn him to pieces, they took him to the Traitor's Window. One look at this dread spot and his voice returned. Hysterically he alternately screamed, whined or blasphemed. And as his body hurtled downwards, those looking through the window could still hear his high-pitched screams.

"So dies *Saint Heron," said the officer-in-charge aloud and all those standing round took

*The Indian expression is Bagla-Bhagat. The heron, standing meditatively on one leg and waiting for its prey is the Indian type of a sanctified hypocrite.

up his words: "So dies Saint Heron. May he be reincarnated as a snake."

"Of a certainty," remarked Rana Lakshman Singh, who had attended the execution, "he buys honey too dear who licks it from thorns. It was a dog's death, but well deserved."

Then someone else recalled that Balji had grey eyes and repeated the old saying that a grey-eyed Indian and a wall-eyed horse, both are bad and both will let you down eventually.

A few days later the clansmen, headed by the Rawul, attended a thanksgiving service for deliverance from evil. After prayers the chief priest, voicing the Rajput belief that he who falls in battle is spared reincarnation, read out the names of all who had fallen in the fight and then declared: "These were our dear comrades, let their names ever remain graven on the scroll of memory. They have left us, but, exempted from the pains and troubles of a second birth, they have been borne from the scene of their probation in celestial cars by the fair messengers of heaven and now live deathless in the realms of the sun."

And at a feast that night in honour of the dead, Rattan Singh, looking round sadly to where Gorah used to sit, said to the Rana: "Though many guests be absent, it is the cheerful face of Uncle Gorah that most I miss."

XI

AFTER the clansmen had returned to their homes and life had settled down to its normal round again, Rattan Singh, wearying of the confines of forts, turned, as once before, to the strong hills. They felt, he and Padmini, that only in comparative solitude could they find balm for their hurt minds.

Ever since noon they had been marching along through thick jungle to the murmur of birds, bees and the distant lowing of cattle in the valleys below, a lovely sequence of sounds. Now, with the fall of dusk, they found themselves approaching the end of their journey, just as vivid contrasts between earth and sky were coming into being. They turned down a mere track and at last reached the little forest house stalled deep in peace and lovely isolation—the house in which they had spent the never-to-be-forgotten days following the old Rawul's death. It showed through the trees like a lantern, the torches of the servants who had gone ahead streaming a welcome out into the gathering dark.

There, day by day, they renewed themselves from the best founts in life—the sweet scent of earth, the soft sighing of wind in the boughs, the melody of birds, dawn, sunset and moon-washed nights. For both of them this sanctuary stood for a dream-spot—something apart in time and space from life that had passed and life

that still lay ahead. And with the passing of the days came concord between the warring elements within, and the power, not to forget, but to find remembrance softened to the hearability of distant clamour.

The days passed without flurry of time or sound of haste, and to both of them came a power of reverie during which they could sit together with hardly a word spoken yet feeling in perfect unison of spirit ; or conversing leisurely and intermittently as the clouds that drifted over them.

Sometimes a professional story-teller would beguile the hours for them. One story went straight to Padmini's heart and woke therein once more longings for motherhood and to be able to present her husband with a son.

Once upon a time, the story went, a stork was winging its way southwards, bearing a rosy baby-boy for a princess of these lands. As the stork approached the palace where the princess lived, a cruel boy threw a stone from a sling. The stone hit the stork on the head, but, mindful of its precious burden, it managed to gain a high and leafy tree. Upon the uppermost branches it laid the babe: then died.

The baby, cradled safely in the leaves and gently rocked by the summer breezes, felt no alarm. Lying on his back he gazed up into the beautiful blue skies above, cooing and gurgling

as is the manner of babes. But presently he grew hungry and began to cry.

Then all the birds that lived in the tree and in nearby ones started to ask: "What's that? What's that?" And as the crying continued, they went to look, and found the baby.

"My goodness," said the Tree-Pie, "that old Cuckoo has been at his games again, leaving his babies for someone else to nurse."

"No, I haven't" denied the Cuckoo angrily. "It's none of *my* doing *this* time."

Said the crow: "We'll have to feed him anyway. Look at the way he's opening his mouth. He must be hungry."

"Well nothing out of your larder would be suitable," said the Honey-bird, with its beak well in the air, for it had seen the horrid that crows eat.

Then the Honey-bird went off and drew lovely sweet fresh nectar from the roses in the palace garden and returned to feed the baby.

"Now, Crow," chorussed all the birds. "What next must we do?" For, though they didn't like the Crow, they knew he had more brains than all the rest of them put together.

"You must make a nest for him of course."

"Yes, of course, of course," they all agreed.

So the Weaver-bird was called and told to use its skill. But because none of the birds

could lift the babe, the nest had to be built around him. And, watching the Weaver-bird's funny antics—it almost stood on its head at times—the baby laughed, chuckled and kicked his legs till the Weaver-bird said a little testily; 'Can't any of you make him lie still? With all his kicking I keep on breaking my thread.'

"We'll sing to him," they offered, and soon the babe dropped off to sleep. But they would not let the Crow join in, because it always seemed to be suffering from a sore throat.

When the nest was finished, the Crow inspected it. "Far too hard for a naked baby," was his judgment. "Find something soft to line it with."

Just at that moment a flight of ducks passed over and the Crow cawed loudly to them. One Eider Duck came down. "What's bitten you, Crow?" he asked.

On hearing the story, it at once agreed to help. It settled by the nest and began to pluck out the softest of soft feathers from its chest.

Soon the baby was packed in snowy down and the Eider Duck flew off with its waist-coat looking much as if the moths had got into it.

Lastly the Tailor-bird brought rose petals and sewed them into white sheets and a pink coverlet.

When night came all the birds were very tired from their unusual labours.

"Must have someone to look after the baby at night," said the Crow firmly.

"Well, what about you doing it?" suggested the Weaver-bird. "So far we've done all the work."

"Brainless as usual," commented the Crow "Go and wake up one of those sleepy Owlets that make such a noise at night."

So the Owlets took over night-duty, and each in turn sat by the baby, their little eyes acting as shaded night-lights without which no nice baby will go to sleep.

And each evening before the Owlets arrived, the Nightingale sang lullabies, and early every morning the Cuckoo called six times to tell the baby it was time to wake.

The seasons passed and the baby grew bigger and stronger. But the poor Honey-bird got thinner and thinner trying to find him enough nectar to satisfy his growing appetite.

"I simply *must* have some help now," sighed the Honey-bird.

"I know," said the Crow. "Bees. Bees: make them bring honey."

But the bees said they had enough to do feeding themselves with so many thieves about, and refused to help, till the Blue-checked Bee-Eater threatened to gobble them all up, if they didn't do as they were asked.

One day a little Tree Squirrel climbed up. He saw the baby being fed and, being of a happy, sunny nature squeaked in a high falsetto: "Can't I bring some of *my* food for him?"

"What nuts and hard things like that! How can he eat them? He hasn't got a beak."

"But he probably has teeth. Let's look." And he tickled the baby under his chin with his bushy tail till the baby opened his mouth wide. "Look, look," the Squirrel said gleefully, "he's got lots and lots of teeth." And he ped away down the tree.

Presently he returned with an armful of nuts. He sat by the nest, cracking nut after nut and feeding them to the baby, who thought they were lovely and asked for more.

There came a day when the baby crawled out of the nest and began to climb about the ranches.

"He'll be starting to fly soon," shouted Tree-Pie, but the Crow only laughed at him.

"What, fly without wings!" he scoffed and the Tree-Pie felt it had said something very foolish.

By-and-by the baby's journeys grew longer and more daring, till in the end he found himself for the first time on the ground at the foot of the tree. He had never felt the earth before and was a little frightened because, unlike the tree tops, the earth never moved when the

winds blew. He thought that was very strange indeed.

After a time he grew quite bold and went further afield. He even began to find some of his own food from berry and fruit-bearing trees. It was while so engaged one day that he nearly died of fright. He met two men, who seized him and took him on with them.

"Oh how dreadful," gasped Padmini. "Were they kind to him?"

"Yes very kind," the story teller went on. "They took him to the palace and the Princess there, who still had no children, adopted him."

"And after that?"

"He grew up into a fine man and later became the king. And because of what the birds had done for him, he made the killing of all birds unlawful and turned his whole kingdom into one immense bird-sanctuary."

"Rattan darling," said Padmini turning to her husband and putting a hand on his knee, "we simply *must* adopt a baby, too."

"No need to adopt a son just yet," he answered with the tenderest of smiles and hope shining out of his eyes.

XII

THEIR short sojourn in the mountains over, the Rawul and his Rani returned to their capital to pick up once again the threads of life

where they had put them down to meet the Muslim onslaught. And each day Padmini would go to the shrine of Siva Mahadeo, Great God and Giver of Life, to pray that she might be blessed with the gift of a son.

Seated in the dark, incense-reeking temple by the side of the Brahmin priest, she said her prayers and made her vows, then lingered on for a time listening to the intoning of the priests and the occasional throb of drums. And anon, when the priest added butter to the mouldering fire before the image, a flame would leap up, lighting sensuously and for the moment the face of the God of Creation and his hallic emblems and allegories of fertility carved in the walls around.

Then some months later she knew that her prayer had been answered. With a heart overflowing with joy and gratitude she went to the temple, and there, with only the priests to hear her, she sang God Siva's hymn :—

"I am the God of the sensuous fire,
That moulds all nature in form divine,
The symbols of death and of man's desire,
The springs of change in the world are mine."

Thus fortified, she returned to tell her husband the news that thrilled her and she knew would thrill him too. And he in his turn told Mysu and the three together rejoiced and gave thanks to the great God Siva.

"Now my son, whom I have personally trained just for this, shall serve him even as I

have served his father," the old man said, his eyes alight with excitement.

"And his son afterwards shall serve my grandson," Rattan Singh told him, patting him on the back. "See that he, too, is brought up as he should be."

Book Four : Johur

I

ON the east side of the royal cremation ground, hard by the spot whence Aunt Jodhi had left on wings of flame to join her lord in paradise, Rattan Singh and Padmini erected a memorial to Uncle Gorah.

From a marble base it rose on four carved pillars to support a glistening dome. The sides of the base were sculptured with a frieze of elephants and horses, meeting on each side of a graven tablet which recorded in letters of gilt the following tribute to his gallantry :—

While the sun continues to warm the earth,
so long shall the fame of Gorah Chohan
endure.

While the icy Himalayas rest on their base and
the ocean continues to form a garland
round
the neck of earth, so long shall Gorah
Chohan's glory be perpetuated.

In the midst of the armies of the foe Gorah
Chohan was a tiger and as a flame in dry
forest.

For Aunt Jodhi they raised a little platform
and placed, upright thereon, a stone depicting

a female figure with hands joined in prayer; for such is the custom of Rajputs.

Lastly Rattan Singh took Badul and girded him with a sword, hailing him as Thakur in his father's stead.

All these things they did, not only because it was right and proper, but for the unquenchable love they bore them.

Then one day Padmini said to her husband: "Badul has now reached man's estate and ought to be married, don't you think?" And Rattan Singh, who knew the great happiness that marriage can bring, sent out messengers on all sides to find a lovely and fitting bride for Badul.

As they returned, each messenger reported the results of his mission, vying one with the other in praising his own find; for to the discoverer of the lady, who would finally be chosen, a rich reward awaited.

On one occasion, bored by so much discussion, Badul rose, stretched himself, yawning, and started to leave the room.

"Whither away, young lover?" Padmini's eyes were screwed up in the amusing way she had, when dealing with a fractious male.

"To get away from all this fuss designed to snare me and hit me with a bit and curb."

"Don't you want to get married?"

"Yes, when you find me another as sweet and lovely as yourself. Till then.....," he shrugged his shoulders.

"Thank you, Badul." She blushed a little. "Don't worry, we're going to find you a really delicious little wife."

At long last there came the day when, all details arranged, Badul with his marriage party were due to set out to go to his future father-in-law's house. He went to say good-bye to Padmini, who, by custom, must remain behind.

"Well, good-bye Badul, and best of luck."

"I'm scared stiff," his face wore a serious look.

"Oh! cheer up. If heredity means anything, you'll soon get over that," she laughed, recalling Gorah's amiabilities, and Badul began to laugh a little too, though he looked sad.

When the door closed behind Badul, she wondered had she done well to joke with him

about his father. For herself, she felt glad that at last she was beginning to be able to think about Uncle Gorah as a happy flash-back, a treasured memory, and forget the poignant hour of his death: though this, of course, would never dim her gratitude for his self-sacrifice on her behalf.

The whole of Chittorgarh and Taleht turned out to see them off. They made a brave show in the pearly sheen of dawn, and later filed out of the main gate just as a cloudy sky began slowly to change to orange and rose. The party was several hundreds strong, all armed, for they were to pass through wild country inhabited by wilder jungle tribes always on the look-out for plunder. In the centre was an elephant bearing a curtained howdah—to bring back the bride.

Their way at first lay through flat uninteresting country. On the third day, however, they entered the hills. The road now became stone-strewn, narrow and windy. On both sides rose sharp hills garbed in thick forest, giving way here and there to small patches of cultivation where the soil was deep, and only ending at the precipitous cliffs which formed the crest of the range.

They rode on hour after hour, keeping a strict watch for marauding Bhils. These little men of the forests were good marksmen and not above shooting an arrow just for the fun of trying to hit a moving mark. But beyond seeing

a few scattered patches of these people upon the hillside, they passed through unmolested.

About the eighth day (they had all quite lost count of time) they reached a village in the cool of the evening. Pitching their camp close to a well, they leisurely ate their meal and then sat on talking in the darkness. Looking up into the sky Badul felt very close to the stars, and said so.

"You'll be closer to something just as pretty and a good deal warmer in a few days," one of his companions reminded him coarsely.

Badul, annoyed, went off to look for a place to sleep. He spread his blankets on a patch of grass and turned in. As he lay there wooing sleep, he saw the trees of the forest around as a high black wall, heard a faint rustling as the night wind passed over their tops. "I wish it were all over," he sighed and fell asleep.

Presently he was awakened by the clatter of horses and loud talking. A party from the bride's home had arrived to escort them over the remaining miles. It was some hours before the camp again settled down to quiet, and then Badul found he could not sleep again.

To-morrow night he would not be alone, he realized with apprehension. With him would be a stranger and one of the opposite sex. Hell: he thought, I'd ten times rather be shut up in a prison alone. What am I going to talk to her about?

Dawn found him still restless and oppressed

In the greyness of the morning they began the short march that should bring them to the end of their journey before noon. There would be a halt to eat and change and then the procession through the town.

"Why Badul?" Rattan Singh was smiling, "you look as if you were just going to have your *moustache cut on instead of about to don the red robes of a bridegroom."

"If you were going to cut my head off, I'd feel happier."

"Heavens, bad, do you think you're the first young bridegroom to feel nervous? Cheer up, we've all been through it, and survived."

The procession was noisy and colourful, Trumpeters, drummers, flags and in the centre Badul, in a coat of brocade, wearing a fine pearl necklace (Padmini's gift) and carrying a jewel-hilted sword, the wedding gift of Rattan Singh.

Then a rest and food, preparatory for the afternoon when the marriage would begin.

"Have a bit of sleep now, Badul," someone ragged him. "You'll get none to-night."

Badul gave him a withering look but took the advice.

The 'Siyala' ceremony, when the bride's party awaits the coming of the bridegroom and his supporters, was timed for the afternoon.

sign of mourning.

An hour or more after the scheduled time (punctuality in the East is for the lowly; certainly not for princes or a Bindraja, king for the day, as bridegrooms are called), the head of the procession came in sight, the vanguard comprising Rawul Rattan Singh, relations and friends, all on foot. Behind followed musicians and retainers, and, lastly, a towering elephant, its cheeks and trunk painted gaily in weird designs, caparisoned in silver head-plate, necklaces and ear-chains, and bearing a massive golden howdah, in which sat Badul, in a scarlet dress and pagri with long gold fringes that kept tickling his ears. Then more retainers bringing up the rear.

From his swaying eminence Badul looked down upon a seething crowd lining the route on both sides and found himself level almost with balconies or flat roofs crowded with women and children. Ahead he saw a large marquee pitched just outside the walls of a fortress-castle, the home of his future father-in-law.

As they approached, the bride's party rose to meet them, and a few minutes later both parties entered the marquee, to rest and wait while priests administered some sacrament to the now dismounted bridegroom. Presently Badul left to perform the ancient 'Toran' ceremony, reminder of the days when brides were won by force.

Back in the howdah, lance in hand, he rode up to the barred portals of the castle.

From an upper window a metal shield was lowered. This he struck with the point of his lance, symbolising the forcing of the gates. Cheers broke from the crowd, the doors opened on heavy, creaking hinges and, still mounted, Badul entered the courtyard to seek his waiting bride.

From the courtyard he ascended on foot the stairway to the zenana.

For the moment he found himself a lone male among what seemed to him a nightmare host of women. The room was hot, the atmosphere reeky with heavy perfumes. The bride's mother came forward to welcome him and he heard himself mumble a reply. She led him to a seat and as he walked across the room he got a first glimpse of his bride—a small, fragile little figure, robed for marriage, her face covered, her head bent, whose name he had just learnt was Shanti.

then gathered force, till it caused a shaking of her shoulders. Shanti was laughing.

"Wha...wha...what on earth's the matter?" Badul was genuinely worried. He'd heard of women having hysterics and wondered if this was a case.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. Here I was frightened to death, and now I find you've been nervous too." And she began to laugh again.

"Here, come here. I *am* scared. What shall we do?"

"Have a good sleep, I should think. I'm half-dead. Aren't you?"

"Yes. I didn't get a wink last night."

* * *

It may not have been the ideally romantic introduction to married life, but it was undoubtedly a sound one in their case—two, overwrought young strangers cast together by the waves of life.

When Badul woke next morning it was just beginning to get light. He noted the delicious moulding of her arm and hand, the little pointed fingers, the delicate wrist. Then he let his eyes travel down to her face—the first time he had ever seen it.

He rubbed his eyes. "Lovely, lovely!" His voice was just above a whisper.

Shanti's eyes opened, smiled.

"Please say that again."

"You're lovely, Shanti, lovely."

"You look nice, too."

She put out a hand towards him, shyly, tentatively at first and finally took his.

And what night had withheld, dawn brought with a flood of rapture.

* * *

II

BACK again in Chittogarh, life took on its old tempo. Wounds had healed to scars, each day was full and throbbing. But most exciting of all for Rattan Singh and Padmini was the thought that in a few months' time their child would be born.

Then, too, Shanti was proving a most delightful addition to the family. Her vitality and warm impulse towards living and loving found an immediate echo in Padmini's heart; she was so amusing when she talked, so infectious when she laughed—she always seemed to be laughing. The two became inseparable, or so Rattan Singh and Badul jokingly complained. For Badul the present was intoxicating, and the prospect dazzling. A great sense of new life surged through his veins.

He was young and had all life before him—a life to be shared with this adorable young creature. He beheld her as dream made flesh: charm and wit, a smile and a voice that was music, and the loveliest mouth he had ever seen. Each day she bound his heart closer to her's with gossamer threads of love.

Padmini was delighted with the success of her match-making. As she said to her husband one day: "It's simply grand to see how those two adore each other."

"Yes, and love's like a cough, it can't be hid."

And because the hearts of all of them were filled with gratitude for past deliverance, for present joys and for future hopes and expectations, they decided to make a pilgrimage to holy Pushkar and there render homage to God Brimha.

Far, far back in time before creation was even begun, Brimha assembled all the celestials on this very spot, and performed the Yuga ceremony. Around the hallowed place walls were raised and sentinels set to guard it from the intrusion of evil spirits.

"Look around, if you want proof of the sentinels", the Brahmin invited, his outstretched hand sweeping the circle of the compass. "There to the south is Rutnagir, the hill of gems; to the north is Nilagir, the blue mountain; east and guarding the valley is the hill called Kutchaktar; and on the west Sonachuru, the golden mount."

He went on to tell how Nandi, the bull-steed of Mahadev, was placed at the mouth of this valley, to keep away the spirits of the deserts, while God Kanya himself kept watch over the northern approaches.

When all was ready the sacred fire was kindled: but Brimha's wife was nowhere to be found. Rather than stop the proceedings another lady was selected to take her place as a temporary substitute. Unfortunately the substitute was of very humble origin.

"Why was a woman necessary?" asked Shanti.

"The sacrifice would not have been complete with only one sex represented." It was explained.

"I hope you hear that, Badul," said Shanti wrinkling her nose. "Even the Gods can't do without their wives in important matters."

"Admitted, my dear. A wife *or* a substitute!" And he ducked to avoid the cushion she threw at him.

The Brahmin looked somewhat shocked at such levity, but continued: "While the ceremony was in progress, Brimha's wife returned. She was furious at the indignity that had been placed on her. Brimha tried to soothe her, but she only became the angrier. Finally she retired to the Mount of Gems: and thence disappeared. On this spot a fountain gushed up, which still bears her name."

The Brahmin paused for a while and then said: "Look, too, at all those sand-dunes. They came into being that same day."

"How?"

"Why?"

"Well, it was the duty of Mahadev, at the end of the ceremony, to put out the fire. Being in his usual state of intoxication due to excessive use of drugs, he forgot to do this. The fire spread and the whole world was in danger of being destroyed. It was Brimha himself who came to the rescue. He sprinkled sand on the flames and thus extinguished them. Those dunes you see are the sand he threw over the fire."

don't you think, in gratitude, we might build an alms-house at Pushkar for all those poor sufferers, keep doctors there, and try to have them healed?"

Rattan Singh patted her hand. "It's a lovely thought. We will."

III

SULTAN 'Ala-ud-din sat on his throne of gold amid the glitter of precious gems that surrounded the royal seat, surrounded by his court with all the pomp and heraldry of darbar. But gloom pervaded the imperial halls. All day, every day now those whose duty it was to serve him found him in an odd, jumpy and entirely unpredictable state of mind. Some inner canker seemed to be poisoning his springs of life. His ministers, his women, even the public felt the tension of their master. At times his burden was too much for him: then it would overflow him and those around him as a stormy river overflows its banks.

On this day he was dispensing justice in the hall of public audience. Ulagh Khan, his brother and chief minister, read out the routine business. But the Sultan's gaze was fixed before him, his eyes vacant and unseeing.

Matters of more urgency followed, demanding the royal orders.

"Sire, this is a priority despatch from the Governor of Ghizni reporting a revolt and asking

for the immediate despatch of additional troops."

"Dakhil daftar" —Let it be filed.

"The Governor of Oude reports a raid by the Nepalese and the plundering of the treasury."

"Let it be filed."

Ulagh Khan retired, anxiety written upon his face.

Then the Chief of Police of Delhi came forward.

"Sire, I have reliable information of a plot to burn down the palace and set up a Hindu Raja here in Delhi."

"Let it be filed."

With the shrug of shoulder the Chief of Police stepped back into his place.

Lastly came Kafur, the eunuch, to announce a revolt in the zenana.

"What do they want?"

"Sire, they are angry that you have neglected them so long, and, as a sign of their dissatisfaction, have thrown open the zenana gates."

"Ba chushm-i-Padmini! Che muzaika?" — By the bright eyes of Padmini! What does it matter?"

The Sultan arose: the court dispersed.

"What words are these?" men asked one another as they left the hall, and soon the whole city was repeating the question. "The Sultan raves; his words are loose heaps of sand, his mind a random-driven wreck." Such were the whisperings being passed from mouth to mouth in the bazaars and streets of Delhi.

After his first stunned rage at frustration before Chittorgarh, 'Ala-ud-din had sworn that no more would he traffic in the barren quest for Padmini. "I've a hundred such as she in my zenana," he comforted his spirit. "Yes: and one may.....nay: must supplant the other, for beauty is short-lived. However lovely Padmini now, a few years and her lips will pale, her black hair turn lustreless and grey, her teeth yellow and grow loose, her breasts shrivel or sag flat and unlovely. Ridiculous to limit love-life to the blooming of one May!"

Yet when he had reached his capital and turned for consolation to the women of his court, he found only delusion and disappointment tracking his steps. Fair forms of feline sensuality, soft clinging arms, lips red and full as cherries and gauze-draped breasts, palpitant and eager to be fondled, vied in jealous rivalry to win his smile. But life had lost its zest he quickly knew. All these were his, yearning and ready, his without asking and he did not want them! Now only the unattainable could satisfy his cravings.

Then it was that the pent-up months of his struggles to win Padmini fell apart in an agonized relaxation. He could settle to no work, find no interest in earlier ambitions. The mirrored face haunted his dreams by night, his thoughts by day till every fibre of his brain seemed tautened to breaking-point. He wandered mirror-haunted seeking that face, now on the silvery surface of a pool or river, now in one of the myriad facets of his hall of glass, till eyes strained and starting, and tortured with disappointment, he sank down upon his bed exhausted.

But this could not continue. The Sultan was going melancholy mad. Court physicians prescribed strange Eastern drugs guaranteed to bring soggy and impenetrable forgetfulness. But so great was his need that even their effects quickly grew less and less leaving him wild of eye, dry-mouthed and tossing in despairing consciousness.

In the end it was court conspiracy, fomented by the resentment of the neglected Begums and designed to dethrone him and replace him by a rival, that whipped his mind back to the semblance of sanity, and rekindled in all its fury the tiger in his nature. Lust in the guise of love gave place to envy and revenge, and then it was that he swore; "Padmini shall be taken dead or alive; Chittor laid by fire, sword and hammer in ruins, to be nothing but a blackened memory to the world."

Again the arsenals of the capital resounded to warlike preparations, streets and maidans to the tramp of troops training for the coming campaign. In all this, with its thousand and one details, the mind of 'Ala-ud-din found some relief, yet still lacked healing, for 'he who studieth revenge keepeth his own wounds green'. Desire for thorough preparation that on this occasion should leave nothing to chance, and urgency to slake his hatred in the blood of Chittor bore an equal pain for his driven spirit. Men saw him these days swift yet brooding, his face lined and seamed, the unhappy wielder of power, drugging his soul with action to keep it from despair.

Poets were called to sing the ancient praises of Chittor, that chief among the eighty-four fortresses of India. Listening to a Hindi ballad, now translated for him into Persian, the Sultan ticked off on his fingers each of its vaunted grandeurs, thus marking them down as targets for his wrath, intended victims of obliteration. Its reservoirs and fountains, these should be stained red with the blood of priests; its bazaars, its streets, its colleges, these should be razed, their teachers and students butchered; its marble shrines, its temples and its monuments, these should stand roofless and defiled, their treasures taken, their carvings ground to dust; its bastions and towers of defence planted on rock, these should be levelled and thrown down; even the trees, the shrubs, the flowers brought

through the centuries from far-flung lands, these should be felled or uprooted and cast into the flames. As for that Ghelote owner of this fortress, this prince over thirty-six tribes of Rajputs, he and his family should be exterminated and left to rot in heaps with all who served him. And if Padmini should fall into his hands, first she should grace his triumph and then..... then.....she should be made to suffer, tenfold, the hours and days of misery she had brought to him. That love she had rejected, spurned, that should be the flame that fed a hate deeper by far than the lust it had succeeded.

Each sunset as he watched it brought nearer, so he told himself, the dawn of his revenge. The army grew apace, their camps overflowing the boundaries of the city. Out of a clear sky, he saw them in his mind's eye, descending as a cloud of locusts, darkening the sky, smothering the startled watcher on the walls around Chittor. If mercy he had ever known, now at least its deepest founts were dry. Pillage, death, destruction and acrid-scented, bloody revenge—these were his ambitions, the substance of his dreams by day and night.

Then one day, after months of frantic activity, his generals announced that all was ready. 'Ala-ud-din ordered a full-dress inspection: nothing was to be left to chance. He watched trials of ballistae, checked transport, stores, forage, attended manoeuvres. He was here, there and everywhere. And when he was

satisfied, he announced the date for marching on Chittor—one week ahead.

The remaining days were given over to feasting and revelling. He must, he knew, try to recapture some of his lost prestige. It would be dangerous—madness almost to turn his back on his capital, so soon after its citizens had been ready to depose him. Merry-making then for all there must be, when he would show himself everywhere as a reminder that he still ruled the land.

Of his profuse hospitality on this occasion memories endured for years. All partook of it, and forgot, or did not see, the hidden purpose within. Once again the banks of the Jumna resounded to the strains of massed orchestras, the beat of dancers' feet, the jingle of their anklets. Three sunsets saw the start of corybantic revellings, three dawns came up to find them still in progress. Never before had dancing been more frenzied, songs more aphrodisiac, rewards more lavish, food richer or wines more choice.

On the last evening before the march was to commence, 'Ala-ud-din, sitting on the balcony of his palace, watched, through the carved fretwork screen, the smooth mirrored surface of the Jumna flowing below. Reflections, reflections everywhere—of his own pavilion, of domes and minarets, bridges and trees, long in the slanting light of the sun behind him. In the lazy warmth suddenly something seemed to

revive him. A mirrored world.....a mirrored face ! God : was that phantom coming to life again ? Aghast he tried, putting up both hands, to ward it from him. He must not think ! Work, movement, speed---only in these lay sanity. He rose abruptly as if stung, ordered a horse, mounted and galloped out into the country, followed by two startled servants. He urged his horse till it dropped ; took another ; wore that out. Then, on foot, he strode on through the night.

It was an astonished sentry who, just before dawn, was called on to open the palace gate for a king, haggard, bare-headed, on foot and attended only by two riderless horses caked in dried sweat and dust.

"Tell no one of this," the sentry heard the warning hissed in his ear, "or you die as surely as those whose riderless horses you now see."

IV

FOR old Jaysu, sitting outside the zenana quarters, the hours had dragged themselves tardily, wearily. Was it last night or the night before that began the long vigil ? He hardly knew, could feel only the uneasiness of the hours lying on his hands. Yet, the end that would crown all could not be now far off, and, in the joy of the crowning, hours, he felt sure, would dissipate to minutes.

Coming from a room directly above him he heard from time to time the grinding sounds of a woman's labour. But these were the will of God and not for him to question. All his hearing was attuned to catch another sound, that cry from lungs filled for the first time with the sweet breath of earth, and the signal for the great drums to roll out their message to the waiting world.

Another dull brooding pause in which there was nothing to do but wait for something to happen. He took a dose of snuff to keep himself waking, shifted his position to give his aching bones a rest. It can't be long now; it can't be much longer, he comforted himself.

Now something was happening above: movement, action and the thin shriek of pain. He got up and went to wake his son. "Thy days of duty are about to commence," he warned him. "See to it that ever thou givest thy best."

A maid came down the stairs. Jaysu rose and blocked the way.

"Shall I bid them sound the great drums?" His voice was quivering with excitement.

at the possibility of Padmini bringing forth a daughter had been lost in the mists of his dreaming.

He stood rooted to the spot, motionless, wordless. After a time, slowly as if consciousness had only partly returned, he dragged himself to his own room. There on the edge of his bed, his head buried in his hands, realization came as a flood. In the end to his son he said sadly and falteringly: "Thy stars are not in the ascendancy this night," and wept.

For Rattan Singh, too, there was a deep sense of disappointment, but for Padmini's sake he comforted himself and her by saying: "For all great achievement practice is necessary. Next time we shall do better."

She had smiled at his words and loved him for them, for she realized the courage behind them. For herself, she would have preferred a son, but since God had seen fit to send her a daughter, this little unwanted creature, who so long had lain warm against her heart, should be loved and cherished.

When her days of convalescence were over she and her baby moved to the water-palace. There hour after hour Shanti would join her in baby-worship till Rattan Singh, coming upon them, would remind them jokingly: "It's time to put dolly away and have supper."

"But don't you think she's perfectly adorable, darling?"

"Absolutely adorable — just like her mother."

Then Padmini would give her baby over to the nurse, and go to sit on his knee up on the flat roof above.

"I'm so happy, beloved, so happy. And just as soon as we can, let's try to give baby a little brother."

"Not for at least a year." This with feigned sternness. "I'm not going to have you turned into a machine." And the first golden edge of the moon rising in the east would find them still sitting utterly content, oblivious of time and the world around.

It was old Jaysu, now quite reconciled and one of the baby's most ardent worshippers, who, coming upon them all together one day quoted the ancient proverb: "A happy family is but an earlier heaven."

unaware of the storm that was brewing, content in the belief that the way lay clear for the prosecution of his life's plan, he was looking forward to these annual celebrations with a happy abandonment he had not felt for many a long year.

On the day before the hunt coats of green were distributed to all chiefs and those who would attend them, as immemorial custom demanded. After that astrologers were called to search the skies and fix the auspicious hour for sallying forth to slay the boar in honour of the goddess Gouri. In the meantime hunters had been sent out to mark down a fitting quarry, for success on this occasion is ominous of future good and no means may be neglected to secure it.

Dining together that evening, Padmini and Shanti sought to impress upon their respective husbands their responsibilities, and to extract from them promises to avoid excessive recklessness in the chase.

"I know you Rajputs," Padmini was saying, as long as you can get a reputation for daring, you don't care whether you break your necks or not. Do please remember, both of you, that you have others dependent on you now."

"But, my dear girl," Badul expostulated, "what if the boar breaks right in front of me? I can't let it go, that would be a terrible insult to Gouri."

"Nobody expects you to. All we ask is that you do nothing *rash*. Leave rashness to foolish youth to whom it belongs."

"And," put in Shanti, "when Padmini speaks of rashness, she means any act which you would not do if you had no audience to play to."

"Well, having listened to all these words of wisdom," laughed Rattan Singh, "what about something to eat?"

"And give you a chance to forget them, eh? Seriously, darling," Padmini felt she must go on, "do please be careful. I remember the last hunt, when half of you came back with wounds or broken bones."

"Listen to that," said Badul. "Did you ever hear such exaggeration? Two people received slight injuries: Dad was one of them—he broke his legs."

"And you his son, I suppose," Shanti's nose was high, "feel you have to emulate or surpass that? Well, if you do, I'll not nurse you."

"All right, I'll be careful," Badul agreed ruefully and for the sake of peace.

* * *

On the freshness of next morning the cavalcade swung through Tahleti. Behind them soared Chittorgarh, silhouetted against

grows greater as they enter the cane field. Presently several jackals emerge and sneak off; then a sounder of pig creeps out and jogs away over the maidan. Badul and Ursi have seen it and are after them at full gallop. The big boar leading the sounder hears them and, with one turn of his head, gets into full stride. But too late. Ursi is almost on top of him when he jinks right across his enemy. Horse, rider and boar fly headlong. When the dust clears Ursi lies pinned under his horse and the boar is standing almost over him, angry but a little dazed.

Things look bad for Ursi but Badul arrives just in the nick of time. Throwing himself from his horse, he draws his sword and, as the boar charges, steps neatly to one side. Then with one slash he almost decapitates him. The boar falls with a sob dead on his side.

"Hurt?" asks Badul.

"Not much, but I must have another horse. This poor devil is about knocked out; he fell on his head."

In the meantime other flying boars have broken cover. Ursi and Badul watch the chase from a knoll. They see three riders driving their steeds at full speed, bounding like antelope over every obstacle, their lances balanced in the air, in pursuit of one big fellow. He runs, jinks and fights for all he is worth, but is quickly slain.

"They are moving to another cover," says Ursi a little later. "Come on."

"Sure you're all right?"

"Damn stiff and sore, but I'm not going to miss the fun."

Cantering along, they pass a little group of Rajputs dismounted and standing with panting horses over an enormous fallen boar.

"He ripped two coolies and killed a horse before we finished him. He was game to the last."

"Only just got him?"

"Yes, the cunning old devil waited hidden in the cane till the beaters were right on top of him."

In the next beat several more pig were killed, but it was just when Rattan Singh had decided to call it a day that the unexpected happened.

The beaters were coming in when they put up a panther out of a patch of long grass and scrub. It bounded off, back arched, tail straight and perpendicular. Then everyone started galloping after it in a bunch. The pace was hot and the riders closing in, when suddenly the panther squatted. There was no time to pull up; the horses just shot over the crouching brute. As the last horse passed, the panther sprang. There was a shrill neighing and the

horse shot into the air the panther clinging on behind the rider with tooth and claw.

A few moments to recover and the whole hunt gave chase. It was no case for spears, but swords flashed and soon the panther dropped off, cut to ribbons. A spear through the spine finished the brute on the ground.

"I thought you were trying to take him home on your back alive," laughed Rattan Singh, coming up.

Then breakfast, under the trees, of pork freshly cut and roasted in the embers, and each boar thrice slain over cups of cheer. It was late afternoon before they returned to Chittor.

Inside the fort a gaily-dressed, noisy crowd swarmed in the streets. Women were going about in little batches singing their spring-song:

The festival of Holi,
Which ushers in the spring,
Is here again, dear husband,
So you your gifts should bring.
In spring the earth is gen'rous,
It decks the world anew:
Let nature's rule of giving
This day be kept by you.
So don't delay or tarry,
But clothe me in a gay
*Fagunia and Sari,
To-day, to-day, *to-day*.

*Fagunia is a special dress worn by women for the spring stival.

Add necklaces of silver
And bangles as you may,
But don't forget time gallops
So bring your gifts TO-DAY.

Padmini and Shanti awaited their husbands' return with nervousness.

"Anyone hurt?" they asked in unison when Rattan Singh and Badul came in.

"Yes nine killed, I'm sorry to say." Badul was looking very solemn.

"Nine killed—how terrible!"

"Yes, isn't it? That means probably about 18 widows, as each usually has two wives."

"Who are they?"

"Eight Mr. Boars and one Mr. Panther."

"Oh! Badul, you wretch! You gave us a horrid fright."

As the merry month advanced, revelling increased. Each night at sunset the drums began, the rhythm quickening as the young men collected to form two rings and dance in a never ending chain where each pair as they pass strikes stick to stick. And at day time groups continually patrolled the streets throwing crimson powder at each other.

On the 8th day 'Holi' was played on horse-back on the terrace before the palace.

Each chief who chose to join was supplied with missiles containing red powder. With graceful and dexterous horsemanship they darted at each other, pursuing, caprioling and jesting, while the town looked on.

The last day, or 'Poonum' ended the 'Holi' when the drums from the Tripolia gate summoned all Chiefs with their retinues to attend the Rawul and accompany him to the Chougan in procession.

There, surrounded by his Chiefs, the Rawul passed an hour listening to songs in praise of Holica, while a scurrilous verse from some wag in the crowd reminded him that his high rank was no protection against the license of the spring Saturnalia and that the goddess at this season required him to fulfil the command "to multiply." On the way back they were deluged in crimson powder by the crowds that lined the route and took full advantage of the licence of the season.

The same night the Rawul feasted his clansmen and distributed cocoanuts and painted wooden swords, intended as a burlesque in keeping with the character of the day, when war is banished, and the multiplication, not the destruction of man, is the behest of the goddess who rules the spring.

VI

WN at Chittorgarh, centre of the strong and stubborn land of Mewar, soaked in its hatreds and old tragedies—Chittorgarh,

protracted shipwreck, of which the debris were his hopes, his plans, his ideals. All through the years disappointment had dogged his steps of hope: each time his fortune seemed brightest some evil spirit stepped in to trip his heels and bind them more hopelessly in a tangled skein. The pitiful puzzle of it all! He had believed that to fulfil one's mission all one had to do was to have one idea, one ideal, and to hold to it and let it be one's guiding star. And now, he asked himself, had anyone control over his life? Were not ideas just dreams and dreams but dead things in the guise of living? Doubt of God, doubt of his destiny, doubt bitter and perplexed assailed him.

He sat on deep in dejection and tongueless bitterness, his mind striving to pierce the dark mists of disillusion. How quickly sometimes turns the wheel of fate! Only yesterday enthusiasm had filled his being. Now it seemed to him as if he had been building in snow—snow that was melting rapidly before the hot winds of evil, and that all his hopes had flared up and burnt themselves out suddenly like a stick of incense.

He dragged himself to his feet and went up on to the battlements. He saw the countryside filled with Muslim troops; there was the blare of trumpets, the green banners of Islam. A hot wave of fury and disgust engulfed him.

VII

“NOT even a bird could have passed out so closely was Chittor beleaguered,” wrote a chronicler of the siege, and to Rattan Singh, when four months had passed, the chances of successful resistance began to look hollow.

On the day following the arrival of his hordes, Sultan 'Ala-ud-din had been seen riding round the hill planning with his officers the division of his forces and direction. As he gazed up at the celebrated and disdainful stronghold of Rajput chivalry towering above him, he felt he was seeing it for the first time. On the last occasion his mind and eyes had been filled with one thought, one image only—Padmini. Now, though she was still the mainspring of his actions, he perceived Chittor rather than its Rani—Chittor which he would pull down from around her and so strip her for his vengeance. He saw and savoured fully the beauty of this rock-based citadel. Simultaneously, with the eye of a soldier, he saw its strength, its power to resist him. Ravines on three sides and a massive wall enclosing the whole. Proud and arrogant Chittor frowned back at him, till fiercer and fiercer within him burnt the longing to tear down its defiant battlements, and to force his way with fire and sword through its defences straight to its heart, the palace, and the hall of mirrored memory.

Siege work had started almost immediately but a full month elapsed before the investment was complete. In that interval parties of Muslims had been detached to pillage and lay waste the country round. The smoke rising from near-by villages and hamlets daily attested the thoroughness of their work and brought groans from those watchers who recognized the destruction of their own homes.

Several attacks with scaling ladders had been made by the enemy but bloodily repulsed. Great boulders rolled from the battlements down upon the attackers below, and earthen pots filled with red-hot ashes or ground chillies, had scorched or blinded those who essayed to mount by ladders. They fell headlong and screaming to writhe in agony on the ground.

Then there had been the attempt to force the Surajpol gate. The attack was made up the stone-slabbed path at the bottom of which Rattan Singh had been made prisoner.

A shouted warning from the sentries above the gate, and then the sound of a great marching of feet up the causeway. The ramparts jumped to life and the air whistled with the feathery flight of arrows.

The Muslims, shields over their heads, were bringing up a battering ram.

Thud : thud : thud. The gates shivered and cracked, but still held firm. Rattan Singh brought up a picked reserve to counter the first

out; then it turned and fled crushing or scattering the crowded ranks of the Muslims in its path.

"Let that be my greeting to the Sultan," yelled Badul at the retreating foe.

To render the gate safe, bales of cloth, sacks filled with cotton, and brushwood faggots soaked in oil were piled up behind it, to set alight should the attackers return before repairs could be effected. But they did not come. The failure of the attempt had taught the Sultan a lesson in caution. "Let them get hungry," he told his generals. "That will blunt their sting." And he sat down to starve out the garrison.

When the rainy season set in, the violence with which it broke brought hope to the garrison. It was one thing to be in the shelter of the fort and its many buildings; quite another to be exposed in the open to such a deluge, and they prayed that sickness would break out among the foe.

For three days and nights the Muslims did not know what it was to be dry. Never had they been so wet before. Every path was a rivulet, every nallah a raging torrent. Water streamed through their bivouacs, cooking became impossible. Hungry and miserable they sat huddled together. Then, a few days later, sickness broke out, but in so vast a host the loss, temporary or permanent, of a few hundred men gave no tangible advantage to the defenders.

In one way the rain actually helped the Muslims, for it softened the iron-hardness of the ground. 'Ala-ud-din took possession of the hill top, known as Chittoria, which, standing about 150 yards from the walls of the fort, forms the southern extremity of the ridge. From here he set his men to drive zigzag saps towards the walls with a view to weakening them by undermining.

At first when the sappers came within bow-shot, the toll taken of them by the defenders on the wall was tremendous. Later, protection was given to the diggers by shielding them with basket-work cylinders covered with hide and filled with earth. These were rolled before the diggers as they worked forward. Then Rattan Singh brought up ballistae, and pounded the sappers day and night with heavy rocks till they abandoned the attempt and withdrew.

For another two months the siege dragged on uneventfully. Then 'Ala-ud-din called his generals to discuss another attempt at assault. "Low rations must by now be having an effect on the enemy's morale," he told them.

"Hurry is only good for catching flies. Why not wait a bit longer?" suggested Ulagh Khan. "These Rajputs are tough as steel."

"I agree with that, Sire," seconded Kafur and then quoted from the Koran: "Haste is of the devil."

But the Sultan would not be persuaded. Till revenge was his, he felt, never again would he know peace of mind. An assault must be made if only to test the morale of the beleaguered garrison.

So he ordered an assault on the Surajpol gate again.

On this occasion he contrived a movable fortress upon the backs of a dozen elephants. In this way he hoped to place a body of picked men on a level with the defenders. It was their duty to gain a bridge-head which would allow of scaling-ladders being brought up and an entrance in force effected. The elephants were to be chained together under the platform of the travelling fortress.

One early morning, when a soft misty sunshine was spread over the scene, astonished sentries on the walls watched the approach of a swaying edifice, the like of which they had never seen. But the large force carrying ladders, which followed behind, left no doubt in their minds that an attack was imminent. They immediately gave the alarm.

Soon the battlements were packed with soldiery and the reserve, supported by elephants, drawn up in place behind the gates. Rattan Singh, swift as a weaver's shuttle, was here there and everywhere, ordering, encouraging.

"Get the fires lit and heat some arrow heads," he ordered and his words were as goads. "Yes, and load the ballistae."

"Those elephants are armoured, I'm afraid," said Lakshman Singh coming down from the battlements. "How do you propose to deal with them?"

Rattan Singh pointed to the men busy with the fires. "Drop rocks on them as they come in range and then shoot red-hot arrows into the elephants, if the rocks haven't stopped them."

"I see, but you'll have to shoot from a low level to get under the armour."

Rattan Singh paused and scratched his head. Then: "You're right. Get a hole cut in the bottom of the gate to shoot through, will you? And he was off again to the top of the gate.

The travelling fort had now reached the bottom of the causeway, four elephants abreast. It was roofed but the sides were open and bristling with spears, except in front where an obvious draw-bridge was attached ready to be lowered over the top of the gate.

The causeway was barely wide enough for two elephants abreast and the outer ones struggled for footing, making their burden above creak and lurch dangerously.

When within range Rattan Singh gave the order for the ballistae to go into action. Great

jagged pieces of rock whined overhead but, firing blind, only one found its mark and did but little damage. On, steadily on, came the fortress.

Now it was up to the gate and the draw-bridge was being dropped. To the thunder of the captain's shouting half a hundred men poured out. The top of the gateway was theirs. Then turning right and left they charged down the battlements. Rattan Singh on one side and Rana Lakshman Singh on the other strove to hold them. But the way was narrow and in single combat sword and shield were hard pressed to match a spear. Matters looked black for the Rajputs.

Suddenly pandemonium broke loose. Red-hot arrows shot into the bellies of the leading elephants made them reel backwards. The beams of the fortress snapped, chains broke, and the whole contraption slithered to the ground in pieces. The maddened beasts turned and bore down on the ranks of the Muslims packed behind them, tearing their way through, trampling hundreds to death in their wild rush for safety.

The Muslims on the walls found themselves cut-off. They fell back in a huddled mass to the top of the gate, easy prey for the archers and there died.

The Sultan had sustained another costly defeat.

"So they still can sting," he grumbled watching the operations from below.

"Aye, Sire, they still can sting."

And when one of the mahouts, who had escaped with his life, told the tale of the arrows shot from below, Kafur, ever with a proverb on his lips, observed: "Throw a lucky man into a river and he'll come up with a fish in his mouth."

"Where's the aptness in that?" demanded the Sultan.

"The only flaw in our scheme was to fail to armour the elephants' bellies, and Rawul Rattan Singh had the luck to discover and make profit out of it."

"Umph!"...Well there's nothing left now but to sit tight till they surrender from hunger. Damn them!"

VIII

TEN months had passed since the beginning of the siege. The last attempt at assault had almost faded out from memory. Each day saw the unchanging routine of guard mounting, inspection of defences, and efforts to still the growing pangs of hunger among the garrison by an ever decreasing pittance. But nothing else showed the passage of time; months, weeks, days, it was all one, they slipped past like a stream flowing towards a cataract.

For most of those within the walls the time seemed just an interval between life and death,

a passing through the furnace of affliction. Desponding fear settled upon the less well-nerved, resignation, born of familiarity that blunted the keen thought of death, upon the others.

Rattan Singh and Padmini, watching their babe sleeping peacefully in her cradle, thanked God that childhood has no forebodings. And after her husband had gone Padmini sat on gazing at the little mite, who had come to sweeten her life but who now, in misfortune, made it the more bitter. Her thoughts shying from the present and the future, turned to the past for refuge. When was it that she had conceived the child? Was it during one of those tender nights spent in their country-house out amid the hills and forests, and after hearing the story of the babe and the birds? Had the story-teller touched some hidden spring, releasing locked powers latent within her? She could think of a number of possible occasions, but could not fix on any one with a certainty. Then her eyes strayed through the opened door to the cushioned couch in the adjoining room—her own special sanctuary fragrant with the memories of nearly three years. She recalled one day when Rattan Singh had broken in on her nooning. She had been dozing but woke up when he sat down beside her. For a time they had discussed some exciting but trivial detail of his work. Suddenly he had ceased speaking and taken her in his arms till both had fallen

back exhausted. Was it then that her body had received the fertilising pollen of his love? She could not tell, but remembrance of that day brought a softness to her eyes. She sighed.

As for Rattan Singh, for a long time he refused to accept the inevitableness of eventual capitulation. As hope drained away from others, loyal courage and a belief in destiny rose in him. He would sit projecting visions upon space and time, inhaling in slow, deep-drawn breaths. Providence, he assured himself, would never permit the Children of the Sun, who for a thousand years had been of kingly blood, representatives of the gods on earth, to go down before a barbarian usurper seeking to defile a Rajput queen! Something must, would happen to save them.

Yet sometimes at night these visions of the future sank with the sun into the west. Then it was that time rolled back within his eyes and all the horrors that had haunted him during the first siege returned. If Chittor fell, Padmini must die! This was the knowledge that then beat relentlessly on his mind. At such times he saw her face as it would lie in death, unsmiling, shrivelled, hairless, just a blackened featureless and grinning oval; he saw her body robbed of all teasing charms, charred and unlovely.

Padmini, when she found him restless, sought to bring forgetfulness to her man. Their love, she determined, should pulse red to th

last. She called forth every wile and charm to aid her in the supreme consummation of pleasure; and, after each ecstasy of passion, that strange peace of spirit, which always accompanies the ecstasy of the body, would fall on them both, softening for the time the harsh outlines of reality.

Each day Rattan Singh strove to find some plan to raise the siege, some weak point in the trap that held them. He was willing to sacrifice the fort, he told his chiefs, and to fight his way out, if they thought it could be done and were agreeable to try. But when it was bluntly pointed out to him that success would only be possible if the civilians and women were left to their fate, he shook his head vehemently.

He left the meeting hurriedly after this and walked towards the bazars. The scent of death hung in the air. He had not been there for some weeks as the misery he had seen appalled him. He thought that it could not grow worse; but it had grown worse. The streets which had always been so clean were now strewn with filth and garbage, swarming with flies.

But more disquieting than the stench was the ominous silence that lay heavy over the once noisy streets. Even the most garrulous had lost all desire to talk. On the roofs and verandahs, huddled together in a stench of decaying refuse, exhausted and starving people

gazed about them with dry eyes and gaping mouth, the shadows of coming events, inscrutable and predetermined, hanging heavy above them. Even the usually paunchy priests and bunnias were shrivelled skeletons, the skin of their bellies hanging down like loose pouches.

There came a day when Rattan Singh sat down dully and could think of nothing more to do. Yet one haunting thought remained constantly before him—how from the general destruction that was imminent to save one at least of the royal line to carry on the dynasty. And not only how; but whom.

He pondered the problem all day. He was still probing into it when night fell. Stretched alone on his bed, his mind seemed as rugged, barren soil. Again and again he summoned it to application, but all in vain. Then a voice broke on his solitude and he heard the words: “* Mein bhuka hun.”

He looked up to see advancing in the dim light of a wall-lamp the majestic form of Kangra Rani, guardian goddess of Chittor.

Again the words: “I hunger.”

“What: not satiated, though thousands of my kinsmen and of the foe have shed their blood around thy +tiara?” Rattan Singh hardly realized the words were his own.

* I hunger, or I am hungry.

+ The battlements of Chittor are picturesquely held by Rajputs to be the goddess' tiara.

"I must have royal victims; and if eight who wear the diadem bleed not for Chittor, the land will pass from thy line." This said, the goddess vanished.

Rattan Singh sat up and rubbed his eyes. Had he been dreaming: he felt sure he had not been. For a time he remained gazing into the darkness beyond, then rose and went to Padmini.

"What can she mean by *eight* royal victims?" she asked bewildered.

"After myself the other royal members can only be said to be Rana Lakshman Singh and his seven sons."

"So that means there are nine royal members and the goddess claims eight.....Oh: Rattan, one is to be saved and who more fitted than you?"

"Note that she did not promise the saving of Chittor from sack; only of the *line*, if the sacrifice was made."

"Well?"

"If Chittor falls, I fall with it."

"Then who is to carry on the line?"

"That is for Lakshman Singh to decide."

* * *

On the morn Rattan Singh convened a council of his chiefs. He revealed to them the vision he had been vouchsafed.

"Are you sure it was not just a dream?"
he asked him. "Many of us have queer
visions these nights."

"I am sure;.....but attend at midnight.
Perchance she may return again."

* * *

Brooding darkness broken only by a few
lickering *charags* set in the walls and the deep
shadows cast by marble pillars supporting the
roof. The hour of midnight approaches.

Rattan Singh with his chiefs sit in full
panoply of state. Before their arrival he has
been pacing to and fro, his hands clasped behind
his back, his head now drooping, now tossed
upwards, as befits his train of thought. Will
she come again? Oh, if only she would save
Chittor as well as the line! Then he resumes his
seat, and remains, head propped in hands,
thinking, thinking, thinking.

A rustling as of wind through the hall: a
chilling of the air: a blaze of bluish light: and
Kangra Rani, queen of the battlements, stands
in their midst.

Prostrate before her Rattan Singh invokes:
"Goddess, proclaim thy will."

Sibilant, as if hissing up from the earth
beneath her, the words come: "I hunger, I hun-
ger...I must have royal victims; and if eight who
wear the diadem bleed not for me, the land will
pass from thy line. Though thousands of barba-

rians strew the earth, what are they to me? On each day enthrone a prince. Let the *Kirnia, the Chehtra and the Chamra proclaim his sovereignty, and for three days let his decrees be supreme: on the fourth day let him meet the foe and his fate. Then only may the line continue."

Silence followed by a mighty rush of wind, as if a dust-devil was whirling upwards from the centre of the hall. Kangra Rani was gone.

After a time Rattan Singh rose and bade the others do likewise. "Now you can believe me," he said looking round at the astonished court, his voice deep and triumphant.

Then, while a common thought flicked between father and sons, Lakshman Singh offered himself as first victim to avert the denunciation. Arsi, his eldest son followed him. But Ajey Singh begged to be allowed to take his father's place, urging that he was most fitted to preserve the line by reason of experience in statecraft.

"Possibly, my son, but the fountains of life are dried up, and no longer can I beget an heir."

"Then whom do you choose to carry on the line?" Rattan Singh asked the Rana.

"I command Ajey Singh to shoulder this royal burden."

* These are the insignia of royalty. The *kirnia* is a parasol, from *keren*, 'a ray'; the *chehtra* is the umbrella, always red; the *chamra*, the flowing tail of the wild ox, set in a gold handle, and used to drive away the flies.

And so when the silence of the next night lay over the land and only the call of sentries awakened echoes in the dark town, a little group stood on the battlements near the Lakola gate. A rope had been made fast and hung now on the outside of the wall, its end just above the hill-side below. Rattan Singh embraced Ajey, then stood aside, his eyes sweeping the distant line of the enemy's camp fires, his ears strained to catch the sound of a possible patrol moving in the velvet blackness beyond. He heard a strangled sob and Ajey's broken voice pleading to be allowed to stay, for his father to take his place. And then Lakshman Singh's answer, cool, clear, decisive: "I thank you my son, but it cannot be. Go now, and may God speed, protect and prosper you."

"Good-bye, Ajey, Hope of the Children of the Sun.....And, when you get through and clear of the enemy's lines, send up a smoke message at dawn to tell us you are safe." Rattan Singh whispered in his ear as he helped him over the wall.

Rawul and Rana watched the last of the small band accompanying Ajey disappear from sight. Then they pulled up the rope and sat down to listen and watch, or to await the dawn.

"Do you approve my choice?" Lakshman Singh asked, breaking into a long silence.

"It would have been mine, had the choice rested with me," he heard and was grateful.

An hour or more passed and nothing had occurred to cause them uneasiness. The enemy's watch fires still twinkled, but there was no shouting, no sign of alarm.

"They should be through the outpost line by now?" Rattan Singh said assuringly.

"Yes, and after that it will be easy."

The night air was warm and heavy; sometimes they dozed, but the cramped position prevented sleep. At long last the dark hour of the morning watch was ended. One by one the stars faded away, then the horizon began to be fringed with light. Together they watched dawn light up the valley below, saw the new sun glinting on a distant lake.

"Now watch carefully for smoke," Rattan Singh said, resting his elbows on the battlements and staring northwards in the direction Ajey Singh had gone.

"Too misty yet to see anything at that distance," Lakshman Singh complained. Then almost immediately: "Look, what's that?" and Rattan Singh, straining his eyes, could just detect a dark pillar, rising slowly above the low bank of greyness.

"That's Ajey, and thank God."

IX

'A LA-UD-DIN, in the meantime, sat days and nights in his tent. At first he had given himself over to solitude, thinking therein

to find a sanctuary: soon, however, he knew that in solitude he was least alone and that memory, which in the past had been a joy, had now become a scourge. Restlessness followed and took possession of his being. He summoned his chief officers and with them sought to drown his chagrin. But every now and then, wild of eye, he would rise to go out and shake his fists at the battlements that still barred his path.

At other times he would sit for hours gazing up at Chittor, or idly watching the wind blow aimless patterns in the sand around. And in these hours of impatient waiting his mind, pushing momentarily aside the lust for vengeance which obscured it, would sometimes summon unreason to the bar of sanity. Why in God's name, conscience demanded, was he endangering his whole kingdom by wasting months before this wretched desert stronghold? Was his statesmanship so structureless, his sense of proportion so twisted that, for the sake of revenge upon a mere woman, he was prepared to leave his northern frontiers unguarded, open to the Mongol invader? These Rajputs, if left alone, could be trusted to mind their own business; might even be made useful allies and friends. In the face of the common danger from the north, their sterling qualities as soldiers should surely be grafted into the general defence, not dissipated by internal and eternal strife!

He stirred uneasily on his couch but let his thoughts run on. He recalled the words

contained in a recent appeal (one he had ignored) from his governor in Sind: "The Mongol hordes hover on the borders like a great storm, raising dust over the land. The inhabitants have fled, throwing away their property like leaves dispersed in the wind of autumn." He recalled, too, the report of one of his spies as to what was being said about him in Delhi: "The realm of Delhi has become a child's toy in the hands of the moon-struck successor of Sultan Feroz Khan." Then, too, the stories related in Delhi by refugees from Persia and other Muslim Kingdoms, which had suffered from Mongol invasion, were spreading panic. Their towns had been sacked, their properties seized and their crops destroyed. "Why," they were asking loudly, "does your Sultan do nothing to save you from a similar fate?"

What he was now doing,—the voice of conscience was insistent—was craziness. And, after-all, what had Padmini done to him? She was married to a man whom she obviously loved; she would not have been Padmini the peerless, had she been willing to give herself up to another. A wave of compassion, till then utterly foreign to his nature, broke over him. He would raise the siege, make friends with these gallant defenders of a woman's honour, and return to face the Mongols.

He looked up in the dying light of day to see the hill-top of Chittor playing with colours.

Well, he would sleep on this new-found sanity. Rising he went into his tent.

* * *

Early morning of another day and 'Ala-ud-din, curiously refreshed, lay on his bed. He felt, he told his attendants, like one who has passed through the fires of fever and has awoken cool and restored to health. They looked at him, looked at each other, mystified and nervous in the face of something they could not understand. Outside they asked one another in whispers: "What has happened during the night?", but none could suggest the answer.

Then, on the morning air, came a distant shout of warning, the muffled thunder of galloping horses in the sand, hoarse yells and the rush of men to arms. The alarm was echoing through the camp.

'Ala-ud-din, leaping from his bed, seized his arms and went out. What he saw from within the ring of his own personal guards was a small body of mounted Rajputs charging furiously down upon them. He saw his brother Ulugh Khan come out of his tent, saw the leading Rajput carve him in two almost down to the waist. Then bows twanged and several riderless horses turned and galloped off, but the remaining Rajputs pressed on.

Now they were trying to hack their way through his own guards. They were attempting to reach him. For a moment it looked as if

they would succeed, but more guards had rushed up and soon the last of the suicide squad fell from his horse, to collapse crumpled almost at the royal feet.

He looked round and saw a hundred or more of his men dead or sorely wounded. He went over to his brother's body and lifted it up. Blood still pulsed slowly from the staunchless, gaping wound, to swell a dark and sticky pool staining the sand. He lay the body back on the ground.

Then something seemed to snap in his brain, some cord to sunder. He rose up his eyes blazing, black rage upon him. "This in return for the mercy I would have shown them!" His voice trembled, his hands were clenched. "By my brother's body I swear that never will I leave this spot till he has been revenged a hundred times. Destruction, death and ruin to Chittorgarh and all within its walls!"

For the rest of that day no man dared go near him. He lay upon his bed, moaning, muttering. Forgotten were all his resolutions of the day before, ousted by the earlier and queer drivings of thirst for bloody vengeance.

"And I was going to spare them, make friends with them!" His words rang out bitter and loud followed by a laugh, so harsh and derisive that its hearer shivered uneasily.

Next day Kafur screwed up sufficient courage to approach him.

"Your Majesty may be interested to learn," he began nervously, "that the Rajput who died at your feet was no less a person than the Rana Lakshman Singh".

"How do you know that?"

"I had the body identified by a prisoner."

"What do you imagine he was trying to do?"

"Simply an attempt upon Your Majesty's life. I should have said, except for one curious act."

"What?"

"He was wearing the royal insignia of Mewar."

"Does that mean Rawul Rattan Singh is dead?"

"That is the riddle to which at present we have no answer."

"Umph! Anyway it looks as if they are getting desperate."

"Exactly! It may be the beginning of the Johur. We must be on our guard."

"What exactly is the Johur? I've heard about it but never seen one."

"It is the last awful sacrifice which Rajput despair offers to honour their gods."

"I know, but what do they do?"

"The ladies, or so I have been told, choose rather to die than to fall into the enemy's hands and willingly mount the funeral pyre, strewed for the sacrifice with sandal wood and wetted with fragrant oil."

"And the men?"

"They dedicate themselves to death, by donning saffron-coloured garments and eating 'pan' together. After this they open the gates and await their fate, or throw themselves upon the foe to die sword in hand."

"Well, warn everyone to be watchful and to keep their arms ready for instant use. We don't want to be caught napping again."

* * *

Another three weeks drifted across the plains and hill-top, each fourth day marked by what seemed to have become routine resistance to a crazed little body, led by a Rajput wearing the crown of Mewar, and all utterly regardless of their fate. Not one of them ever lived to regain the fort, but, before dying, they levied terrible toll upon the besiegers.

Then one afternoon it was reported that not a defender was to be seen upon the walls. Solitude and silence seemed to hang over the fort. The same evening 'Ala-ud-din, sitting as usual gazing at the hated battlements, saw smoke curling upwards and the weird red glow of fires rising in the heart of the fort. Soon the word went through the whole army: The Johur.

All night the troops remained under arms expecting the last frenzied sortie: but night windled bleakly to the dawn and still ghostly silence brooded over the fort above them. Then it was that the army was divided into two parts and the order given to advance upon the Rampol and Surajpol gates. The day of vengeance had dawned.

For 'Ala-ud-din, mounted on his elephant, hitted on that lovely August morning appeared all golden welcome, yet peace of life for him, he muttered to himself, would come only when the peace of death had settled upon his enemies.

X

AS Rattan Singh from the top of the Surajpol gate watched the last of Lakshman Singh's sons crash upon the Muslim ranks, and disappear into an abyss of dust and destruction, he experienced the nadir of wretchedness. For himself he felt he had lived too long already: better far to die once for all than always be waiting for death. The comet he had planned to be, lighting brilliantly his realms, now could never blaze: he would be lucky, he thought, if he should go down to posterity as a remote star shining in the skies of history.

But what did all this matter? The only thing that still counted was the fiery fate that faced Padmini and their child—a fate that he had beseeched her to change for the clean quick

danger or instant poison. But she had done what few men, he knew, could have done. She saw the ghastly end approaching and yet faced it apparently unflinching. "Exit by fire," she had told him, "is the road of escape laid down for us by immemorial custom. Can I, the Queen, fail where hundreds of others look to her to lead?"

And when he had persisted, she had reassured him smilingly that pain cannot be unbearable, since, when it cannot be borne, death comes to the rescue, adding: "Probably death is far less terrible than people imagine, and, anyway, it is an experience that no one has to go through twice. So, darling, I'm quite determined to face it the once as a Queen and a Rajputni should."

While she was speaking he had watched her tensely, to see whether the lips or eyes belied her words, and in the end he had to admit they did not. Yet from then onwards, neither of them called things by their name: for both of them there was an understanding that would not flinch from and yet was unwilling to dwell upon the horrors lurking ahead.

The same afternoon Padmini summoned all Rajputnis within the fort to attend at the palace. They came, several hundred of them, wives and daughters of the defenders. Then with that vehement simplicity which is eloquence, she addressed them:

"My Sisters,

Whoever comes to the feast of life must, before it is over, drink from the cup of death. Whosoever arrives at the inn of mortality must one day inevitably take her departure from the house of sorrow. How much better to die with honour than to live in infamy?"

Her listeners broke out into tempestuous sentiment: "Lead us, Rani Saheba, lead us to the rest."

Rattan Singh from his room heard the chorus of fateful voices. His heart froze. With human foes he could contend to the last. It was destiny itself which now confronted him—destiny one away.

He got up and looked out of the window. The women were dispersing to dress and prepare for the ghastly rite. In a short time he, too, would have to say farewell to wife and child. Despair like the damp of hell descended on his soul.

Let us in reverence pass over the poignant moments of parting, and join outside the long ranks of the defenders of Chittor, lining the road, mute and motionless.

Presently their wives and daughters, all of female youth and beauty that Muslim lust could taint, glide slowly towards the fatal

cavern hewn from the rocks close to the Gomukh pool.

Last in the sad procession walks Padmini, her child, mercifully drugged by a nurse, hugged to her breast. For a moment she raises her eyes, liquid and large as those of a wounded deer, to cast a glance on the lake-palace, scene of so many happy times. Towards Rattan Singh, standing like a carved statue, petrified with grief, she dare not look. As she passes him she hears the great sob wrenched from his anguished heart. Stilling her own emotions, she hurries on.

Another moment, and, last of the doomed, she disappears into the dark recesses of the yawning cavern. Faggots are piled at the mouth—the torch applied. The flames rise, the air rings with shrieks.

“Come away, Sire.” The Lord of Rhymes has Rattan Singh by the arm, forces him round, almost drags him from the scene. “Listen not or ’twill unman you for the last act. Think only of the faithless wretch, who seized thee by treachery, that he might ravish thy wife as thy ransom—think of the awful death he has brought upon her by his revenge. Let such thoughts nerve thy arm in the last onslaught, and, cutting a human lane with thy sword, if thou canst get within striking distance of the perfidious Sultan, strike him—and thou wilt die happy.”

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XI

THE dawn of destiny, and, this time blood-red with long shafts of light striking through the low mists in the pass, which separates the two hills like a sword-thrust. The gates of Chittor are open and unguarded, but within the walls, massed at selected points, stand ready those who have made a covenant with death. Their clothes are saffron-dyed, sign of 'no quarter' with the Rajput warrior; their heads and feet bare, their waistbands knotted together, 's' is the custom of Hindus when they devote themselves to death.

The advancing Muslims met no resistance till they had penetrated far into the town, where carnage began which ceased only for lack of victims. At three points the massacre was greatest, near the Rawul's place, at the temple of Mahadeo and around the Rampol gate. Whole quarters of the town had to be stormed, every foot of ground to be bought with blood; each bazaar, each temple, each house a fortress. Trained elephants were brought in and worked ghastly devastation, but still the conflict raged, the Rajputs defending themselves like lions.

From the roof of the palace Rattan Singh and Badul watched their chance. Their game was the Sultan himself; no less. Impatiently their eyes sought their quarry, but in vain. Nowhere could they detect anything to indicate the presence of the Sultan.

"The filthy coward," moaned Badul despairingly. "Why doesn't he give us a chance?"

The hours passed and the turmoil of battle grew less: resistance was coming to an end.

"We can't wait longer," Rattan Singh said, his eyes two coals aflame.

Together they went out into the streets of the flaring, blood drunk city, followed by the remnants of the staff. Royal courage coursed through Rattan Singh's veins. Finding a party of Muslims wrecking Kalika Mata's temple, he charged down upon them, as they turned to meet the attack. Badul and his men caught the fever! Rattan Singh's shout, his waving sword, his mad rush forward fired their blood with his own fierce joy; they hurled themselves on the waiting foe.

As 'Ala-ud-din approached, splashing through blood as if a scarlet rainstorm had flooded the place, an elephant held out towards him the still quivering body of Badul, whom it had just trampled under foot. For a time he sat watching from his howdah a mighty play of swordmanship. Surrounded by those he had slain, his back to the wall of the temple, bloody and panting, with foam-flecked mouth like a galloping horse, stood a Rajput defending himself against hopeless odds.

"Who is he?" asked the Sultan. "He fights like a king."

"A King he is. 'Tis Rawul Rattan Singh."

"Move up nearer." This to the mahout, and then in a loud ringing voice that carried over the heads of the fighters: "Ho, Rawulji, so we meet once again!"

Rattan Singh heard the words, looked up for a moment. Then with a fury that made his attackers momentarily recoil, he sprang across the intervening space. The startled elephant failed to stop or seize him. Now, sword between teeth, he is half way up the trunk: a few more feet and he can reach his enemy. But he must lie unrevenged! Body-guard spears pierce him from all sides. He slips to the ground, blood pouring from his mouth and wounds. A few seconds later his head, jaws moving jerkily, burning, hating eyes open and perhaps still seeing, is handed up to the mahout, who, lifting it by the ears, displays it to the victor.

XII

CLOUDS of darkness dim the walls of Chittor: Kangra Rani, queen of the battlements, has fled. In place of the crimson banner of Mewar, there waves above the Rampol gate the green standard of Islam.

The first drunk flush of victory is passed. 'Ala-ud-din has seen the smoke still issuing from the cavern, where lies consumed the once fair object of his lust. Restless, unable to concentrate, he drifts from place to place.

For a time he wandered as a somnambulist walks, choosing neither one road nor the other, allowing his feet to choose their way. On all sides his eyes met the ruins, the piled corpses, the awful devastation wrought in his name.

Then something outside of himself seemed to take charge. Unprepared, he found himself in a room that was familiar. He stood again in an echoing, vaulted chamber of the palace. For the moment its loneliness appalled him: then, as he looked round nervously, a mirror caught his eye, and over him rushed a flood of memory, like the waters of a cloud-burst surging through a narrow gorge.

Nothing had changed there, not even the memory of his visit. There, beneath a canopy, had sat Padmini. It was on this very spot that he had stood when the curtain lifted. Was it possible that less than two years had passed since he had encountered in that mirror, for the first and only time, the flash of her black eyes beneath a queenly brow?

He moved forward and dropped upon his knees before the mirror, his hands clutching its frame. For a time he remained gazing, gazing into it as if trying to compel, to drag from its depths the image that he sought. But all he saw was his own reflection. With a moan he passed a hand across the glass as if to wipe away the unwanted picture. Again he peered, closer, his eyes straining till mistiness of vision blurred the image.

"Padmini, Padmini, come back!"

The words echoed round the vaulted roof and walls; her name came back to his ears as a whisper softer than honey.

Then from the glassy depths something began to take shape before his eyes. But it was not the face of Padmini.....What he saw, blurred at first but finally clear and sharp-defined, was a face he knew to be his own. But how changed! Silky black beard had turned to straggling grey; eyes weary and pouched: deep lines furrowing forehead and cheeks. He tried to look away but felt his eyes rivetted to the glass before him. Then, aghast, he saw peering over the shoulder—his shoulder—the leering face of Kafur, and a hand extended offering him a cup marked poison.

In a flash he knew what was to be his fate. With a mighty effort of will, he tore himself away and fled into the open air, where, white faced, eyes tightly shut, he tottered into the arms of the waiting eunuch.

The night closed down on 'Ala-ud-din blacker than his worse melancholy could ever have imagined. In the furnace of affliction he knew now that the fruits of his vengeance were as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again; or as ashes that fly back in the face of the thrower. The taste of victory in his mouth had become the bitterness of worm-wood: all its glories had crumbled and dissolved.

A fog of deepest gloom settled with chill breath upon him : nausea came over him.

For some hours he lay tossing in his bed, Kafur in attendance. Sleep, pain's easiest salve, refused his wooings. A little after midnight he sat up. "I must go.....at once. Tell my escort to saddle up." Then piteously and clutching the eunuch's hand, he poured out the bitterness in his soul.

"I'm afraid to think of what I have done : look on it again, I cannot."

For a time he seemed unable to hear Kafur's repeated requests for instructions. It was only just before leaving that he gave an answer : "Leave a garrison, and return as soon as you can with the main-body."

"What are Your Majesty's orders about the temples and buildings ?"

"Let no man lay hands on the palace or the lake-palace.....For the rest I care not. Do as you will."

Then, stumbling in the darkness through streets littered with the debris of his victory, he passed out through the Gate of the Sun on his long, long march to Delhi. For him, through the uneasy thirteen years of life remaining, peace was to be a stranger. Many a time amid the pain of living would he gladly change places with the two royal victims of his vengeance, whose mortal remains lay sleeping in a spot.

even the very name of which he would strive to forget, and upon whose souls rested—in the loveliest words yet penned in English—‘the peace of God which passeth all understanding’.

* * *

From a distant hill Ajey Singh, sole surviving Sun of the Hindus, looked out over the land that was now *bé charagh*, without a lamp. His eyes travelled across the plains over and up to the hill of Chittor rising above the low mists of morning. As the sun mounted, its rays caught the battlements, illuminating their glory and grief-worn aspect like a lambent beam lighting up the face of sorrow.

Chittor! Scene of murder and violence, despoiled of the ornaments of her loveliness; a city, now solitary, that was full of people. How is she become a widow! She that was great among nations, and princess among the fortresses of Hind.

Then from Ajey's parched lips came the solemn adjuration that was to echo down the centuries: “Chittor marya ra pāp!”—By the sin of the sack of Chittor!

